

FAMPO members still confused, skeptical of new state transportation program

BY SCOTT SHENK/THE FREE LANCE-STAR | Posted: Tuesday, April 21, 2015 12:00 am

The state is getting closer to finalizing its new transportation prioritization program, but local transportation officials still appear confused and frustrated by it.

Nick Donohue, Virginia's deputy secretary of transportation, presented an updated version of the program to the Fredericksburg Area Metropolitan Planning Organization Policy Committee during Monday's monthly meeting.

He could hardly get through a PowerPoint slide without a question, and at times outright skepticism, from FAMPO members.

At one point, committee Chairman Paul Milde told members to tone it down and let Donohue proceed with his presentation.

In the end, the committee voted to ask the state to change how the Fredericksburg District is defined in the program and to write a letter asking for clarification on other points.

Signed into law last year, the program will score certain transportation projects according to a weighted system based of six factors: accessibility, congestion management, economic development, environmental quality, safety and land use.

State transportation officials say the program will be a more transparent process that can take at least some of the political gamesmanship out of the process.

The program has four categories into which it will define transportation districts. The categories give each of the weighting factors more or less importance depending on a district's needs and transportation issues.

The FAMPO committee wants to be included in the category that gives congestion management the most weight, in this case 35 percent, the same as the Northern Virginia, Richmond and Hampton Roads districts.

FAMPO members also wondered if the weighted categories leave too much gray area.

Donohue said there may be some "overlap" but added that the categories are "spelled out in very intimate detail."

As he has in the past, Donohue told FAMPO members the program won't be "perfect the first time around."

Another issue for the FAMPO members is the accessibility category and its emphasis on increasing access to jobs within 45 minutes of a given district.

There seemed to be confusion on that point, as FAMPO members thought it focused on commute times. They said that would be unfair to the Fredericksburg District because commute times are so long.

But Donohue said the intent is to determine if a transportation project would create access to more jobs within 45 minutes of a district, not whether it would decrease current commute times.

He added that at least some details of the program likely will be changed before the Commonwealth Transportation Board votes on it in June.

It's also likely details of the program will eventually change after it is implemented.

In an interview after his presentation, Donohue said the state needs a baseline to start with.

Between now and June, state transportation officials will still be seeking input from local officials and the public.

Starting today, the state will be holding public hearings on the draft of the Six-Year Improvement Program.

Since prioritization will impact future six-year plan funding, Donohue said they hope to hear what people think about the program at those hearings.

The hearing for the Fredericksburg area is scheduled to be held at 6 p.m. April 30 at the Germanna Community College campus at 10000 Germanna Point Drive in Spotsylvania.

Scott Shenk: 540/374-5436 sshenk@freelancestar.com