

Dead end for toll road hopes?

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BY SCOTT SHENK

It wasn't so long ago that area transportation officials were glowing about the progress of the proposed \$300-million Interstate 95 interchange project aimed at alleviating rush-hour congestion around U.S. 17 in Stafford and State Route 3 in Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania.

But in recent months the tone has changed drastically as opponents of the toll road were swept into power in Spotsylvania, and have all but killed the project.

The proposal, which was far from approval, called for adding new interchanges along Interstate 95 around Routes 3 and 17. New feeder roads paralleling I-95 would run from 17 to a new interchange at the Virginia Welcome Center and rest area. Two bridges would be built parallel to the I-95 spans over the Rappahannock River.

The exit would connect to a new four- to six-lane parkway that would run through Celebrate Virginia in the city and tap back into Route 3 in Spotsylvania at Gordon Road, where the highway has six lanes.

The connector road, known as the Rappahannock Parkway, would carry a toll and be managed by a private company.

The toll road concept is known as a public-private partnership and would serve as a major part of funding for the project as well as future maintenance and operation.

The George Washington Toll Road Authority was created by the state legislature to oversee the project.

At the authority's May meeting, Lloyd Robinson told members that its Interchange Justification Report on the project had been approved by the Federal Highway Administration. It was only an early stage development in a long process, but one members were clearly happy to hear. Planning had been in the works for years and \$371,000 spent on the justification study.

"It looks like the stars are aligned," Robinson, administrator of the Fredericksburg Area Metropolitan Planning Organization, told the board, composed of locally elected officials and Quintin Elliott, administrator of the Virginia Department of Transportation's Fredericksburg District.

Then in November four conservative Spotsylvania residents—Ann Heidig, Paul Trampe, Timothy McLaughlin and David Ross—pulled upset wins and swept onto the Spotsylvania Board of

Supervisors. They were energized by their opposition to the interchange project, specifically the toll park way.

At their first board meeting this month, the new supervisors made their stance clear, voting to oppose the project in its current form. The resolution said that the supervisors do not support the connector road, but will continue to support finding other solutions to Route 3 traffic problems.

That stance in turn has put the project in limbo, and probably has killed it altogether.

“We’re back to square one with that area,” said Cord Sterling, a member of the Commonwealth Transportation Board and a Stafford County supervisor. The CTB, VDOT and the Federal Highway Administration have final say on approving the project and funding.

Sterling added that all but a small portion of the \$14.8 million set aside for the project’s environmental impact study is as good as gone, too.

He spoke with VDOT officials this week and said it appears that the money will be transferred to other Virginia interstate projects that are “ready to go and have local support.”

This money can only be used for interstate projects, and Sterling said he doesn’t know of any in the Fredericksburg District that are supported and close enough to being ready.

Stafford Supervisor Paul Milde wants the money to go toward a new Courthouse Road interchange in Stafford, but Sterling said that project isn’t far enough along for the \$14.7 million remaining from the interchange project. Some of the funds have already been spent on a required environmental study.

Sterling said the state isn’t going to leave that money sitting in the bank, especially when Gov. Bob McDonnell’s administration has a “get projects done and out” mandate.

The situation is not unlike the Outer Connector proposal of the late 1990s and 2000s. It was an attempt to build alternate routes for congested areas of U.S. 1, I-95 and Route 3, but was stopped by local opposition.

Milde would like to see parts of that plan brought up again to see if there is any support.

Sterling said one possible approach would be to widen the I-95 bridges over the Rappahannock River.

Robinson believes the interchange project is the best solution they’ve got.

Everyone involved agrees that something needs to be done to ease the traffic jams that happen every weekday on the interstate at routes 3 and 17. But, now, no one has the answer, or the money.

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