

Editorial: River crossing plan makes a comeback

BY THE FREE LANCE-STAR EDITORIAL PAGE STAFF | Posted: Friday, July 24, 2015

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Engineering and construction of the much-debated Rappahannock River Crossing project on the Interstate 95 corridor can't begin soon enough.

Local and long-distance drivers who sit in traffic on the interstate in the Fredericksburg area don't need another multimillion-dollar study to prove additional bridges and lanes are needed. Neither do area residents swamped in spillover traffic on U.S. 1 and 17 and State Route 3 any time there's an incident—major or minor—on Interstate 95 in the vicinity of Fredericksburg.

As envisioned now, the crossing project would put new bridges over the Rappahannock and “collector–distributor” lanes alongside the main lanes. This would separate local drivers from interstate travelers just trying to get through the area.

Gone from the project is its most-controversial aspect—construction of a parkway that would start near the Virginia Welcome Center just south of the river and cut through Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania County before connecting with Route 3 west of the most-congested areas.

While some say the lack of the parkway will limit the project's overall effectiveness, it's still a major and needed improvement.

The Fredericksburg Area Metropolitan Planning Organization took steps Monday night to put the river crossing on the top of the regional highway to-do list. After all, the project has the highest scores in the region on Virginia's new and complicated transportation prioritization program.

While this is a longer-range project, some improvements could happen sooner. FAMPO, comprising officials from Stafford, Spotsylvania and the city, approved the Virginia Department of Transportation's plan to spend \$1.6 million for engineering needed improvements on either end of the crossing projects at the U.S. 17/Falmouth interchange and the State Route 3/Fredericksburg exit.

VDOT has another \$18 million available to reconfigure the cloverleaf interchanges to improve traffic



D.C. region may see these transit projects

The new express lanes on Interstate 95, which extend down to Stafford County, have drawn mixed reviews so far and have created a new chokepoint at Garrisonville Road.

flow on those major roads on the north and south sides of the Rappahannock. Anyone who travels Route 3 near Central Park and Spotsylvania Towne Centre during the rush hours knows you need to have your head on a swivel with all the traffic at Exit 130. Again, the plan for the additional lanes and ramps is to separate traffic heading to commercial centers from drivers trying to pass through the area.

FAMPO considers another major I-95 interchange improvement as its second highest priority—the Jackson Gateway project, which would reconfigure interchanges in the U.S. 1/Massaponax area. It doesn't take a complex formula to know major work needs to be done to handle traffic there now. More traffic is on the way. The Spotsylvania Board of Supervisors approved plans last month for 2,270 more housing units at the Jackson Village mixed-use development on top of already approved projects.

FAMPO will vote on the region's transportation priorities in September. And it's crucial that extension of the I-95 Express lanes from North Stafford to the Massaponax area to get in the plan. Though few love the electronically tolled lanes—other than Transurban, the company that operates them—it's clear that a public-private partnership will offer a revenue stream that could get them built in a reasonable amount of time.

The state doesn't have the money for all the needed projects and the region can't afford to be known as the choke point on the East Coast's main highway. It's not good for the community and it certainly doesn't help with economic development and job creation.

Area residents should let local elected officials know their priorities before FAMPO sends its list into Commonwealth Transportation Board this fall.