

Interchange money going elsewhere

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BY SCOTT SHENK

It looks like the controversial Interstate 95 interchange project will be shelved and that about \$14 million set aside for it will be given to other state road projects.

At Monday's George Washington Toll Road Authority meeting, Chairwoman Mary Katherine Greenlaw read an email from Commonwealth Transportation Board member Cord Sterling in which he said the interchange project should be put on hold until a plan with support could be devised.

Sterling, also a member of the Stafford County Board of Supervisors, said in the email that the CTB's next Six-Year Improvement Plan would not include funding for the project beyond an environmental study already under way. That study costs approximately \$800,000.

If the CTB follows Sterling's lead, it won't kill the interchange project, now known as the Rappahannock River crossing.

Michelle Shropshire, with the Virginia Department of Transportation, said the project will remain in the six-year plan. The millions set aside for it would simply be given to other statewide projects.

While it's unclear where the \$14 million would go, a Stafford project could indirectly benefit from the Rappahannock River crossing's demise.

In his email, Sterling said that the CTB would "focus our attention and interstate resources to completing" the Courthouse Road/Route 630 interchange project in Stafford, which is the region's "number one interstate priority."

The state has set aside \$25.6 million for the estimated \$175 million project, which would replace the current interchange on Courthouse Road.

In the meantime, the authority now has to go back to the drawing board in search of an alternative to the Rappahannock River crossing.

After the meeting, toll road authority member David Ross said he was happy that the project probably won't go forward as planned, explaining that using the money on other approved projects "is the best use of taxpayer money."

Ross is one of three Spotsylvania County Board of Supervisors members who pushed against the parkway portion of the interchange project.

The so-called Rappahannock Parkway was included as part of \$300 million in projects aimed at

fixing congestion problems along I-95, primarily at U.S. 17 and State Route 3.

The four- to six-lane parkway would run through Celebrate Virginia in the city and tap back into Route 3 in Spotsylvania at Gordon Road. It possibly would have had a toll, too.

The interchange project had been making its way through the planning process but hit a snag after the new majority of the Spotsylvania supervisors voted against it in January. Residents who would have been affected by the parkway also have spoken out against it.

Other members of the authority spent the past several months trying to salvage the project.

In March, the authority passed a resolution that allowed it to keep \$14.8 million for design and analysis of the entire project, including the proposed parkway, new I-95 feeder roads and bridges and an improved U.S. 17 interchange in Stafford.

During Monday's meeting, Ross and fellow Spotsylvania representative Tim McLaughlin stressed that the authority should work together to find a solution to the congestion problems.

Ross rolled out a map during the meeting to show that there could be alternatives more closely related to the Berea Parkway, a segment included in one version of the long-dead Outer Connector that would wind southwestward from I-95 and the Stafford Regional Airport to U.S. 17.

He and McLaughlin think a bypass could extend from Route 17, across the Rappahannock River, through Spotsylvania and to Route 20 in Orange County.

During the meeting, Ross also brought up the possibility of inviting Orange County to join the toll road authority.

Jim White, a member of Orange's Board of Supervisors, was at the meeting.

"There is interest," he said. "I don't think we know enough yet to rule it in or out."

The authority decided to consider options for the interchange project at its retreat, which likely will take place in July.

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