

Officials debate highway fixes

BY SCOTT SHENK / THE FREE LANCE-STAR | Posted: Monday, October 21, 2013 8:17 pm

The setting—the downtown Courtyard by Marriott Hotel—was nicer, but the monthly Fredericksburg Area Metropolitan Planning Organization Policy Committee meeting still got bogged down in the Rappahannock Parkway tussle.

The issue is part of a nearly two-year battle over what projects will best address the congestion along the Fredericksburg region's Interstate 95 corridor.

With the battle at an apparent stalemate, the state transportation secretary recently stepped in and asked Fredericksburg, Spotsylvania and Stafford to come up with suggestions and send them to the Virginia Department of Transportation.

That has been done.

But at Monday night's meeting, there was long debate about a resolution supporting three of the numerous options to address the region's I-95 corridor congestion.

Supporters said the options are good ones.

Those against the resolution wondered why it was on the table at all.

The options in the resolution include the Rappahannock River Crossing and a western outer connector. The crossing project includes improvements to the I-95 interchanges at U.S. 17 and State Route 3, plus collector-distributor roads along the interstate. It also includes the Rappahannock Parkway, which Spotsylvania officials oppose. It would run from I-95 and connect with Route 3 at Gordon Road. The western connector would run from Stafford's Centreport Parkway, cross the Rappahannock River and tap into Route 3 west of Gordon Road.

FAMPO staff produced maps showing potential impacts of the three options it endorsed.

Spotsylvania officials rebutted that information with some of their own traffic models, which they said have more up-to-date data. The county's data—including traffic signal coordination and the recently completed widening project—showed that future congestion on State Route 3 isn't as bad as that shown by FAMPO's projections.

Spotsylvania Administrator Doug Barnes, along with Spotsylvania Supervisors David Ross and Tim McLaughlin, said it didn't make sense to vote on the resolution. They asked how important the resolution would be in VDOT's decision. They didn't get a clear answer.

But Cord Sterling, Stafford supervisor, Commonwealth Transportation Board member and non-voting

FAMPO member, said all of the suggestions by all localities will be considered equally.

VDOT Fredericksburg District Administrator Quintin Elliott, a FAMPO committee member, said he needs to be neutral.

“If it adds value to our study,” he said, “we’ll use it.”

Ross and McLaughlin were clearly frustrated, but as in past meetings, were resigned to losing the debate.

“I don’t even know why we’re members,” McLaughlin said after the meeting.

Matt Kelly, the FAMPO chairman, pointed out that the Rappahannock River Crossing project, including the parkway, has been studied and endorsed in the past by VDOT and the Federal Highway Administration.

Even if VDOT’s study supports the parkway, Spotsylvania’s FAMPO representatives indicated that they wouldn’t support it.

Kelly and Stafford Supervisor Paul Milde criticized them for that stance.

In the end, the committee voted, 5–4, to pass the resolution, with Stafford’s Gary Snellings joining the Spotsylvania representatives in opposing it.

An interesting note on the project, according to Monday’s discussion, is that if the parkway is built, it likely will not be a toll road, as initially proposed. Instead, if it is built, VDOT probably will administer the project, meaning the highway department could condemn property in Spotsylvania, even if the supervisors oppose the project.

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