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Parkway project finally moving

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BY SCOTT SHENK

An estimated \$300 million Interstate 95 interchange and parkway project recently cleared a big hurdle in gaining federal approval to pursue more studies.

"It looks like the stars are aligned," Lloyd Robinson said during a George Washington Toll Road Authority meeting Monday night. Robinson, who is the authority's director, and a few of its board members discussed how to proceed with the project, which aims to put an interchange at the welcome center and rest area in Fredericksburg.

The authority's Interchange Justification Report on the project was approved on April 28 by the Federal Highway Administration.

Still, Robinson said it will take years to perform design work, financial analyses and environmental studies. Then rights-of-way would have to be acquired before construction could begin. The highway administration will have the final say in whether the project ever actually breaks ground.

"We're just at the beginning," Robinson said after the meeting.

The next phase of preliminary studies would get \$14.8 million in funding through Gov. Bob McDonnell's transportation program, according to the draft of the state's six-year improvement program for fiscal years 2012 to 2017. The governor's massive \$4 billion program has already been approved by the General Assembly. The Commonwealth Transportation Board will vote on it in June.

For years, the Fredericksburg Area Metropolitan Planning Organization has studied ways to improve traffic in the Fredericksburg region. It determined that one way to do that is to improve access points from I-95.

One such access point would be at the welcome center and rest area in Fredericksburg.

If approved, the interchange could connect to a proposed four-lane Rappahannock Parkway, which would run west between State Route 3 and the Rappahannock River and tie in to Route 3 at Gordon Road. The parkway and interchange could carry a toll, but also could be free for high-occupancy vehicles.

Plans for the new parkway include a diamond intersection connecting to the Celebrate Virginia South development's road system near the site where the Celebrate Virginia Live concert series is held, said Jud Honaker, president of commercial development for Celebrate Virginia developer the Silver Cos. Celebrate Virginia is just behind the rest area.

Honaker said that when Silver received a rezoning for Celebrate Virginia South in 1998, it hoped the connection off I-95 would come much more quickly. Now he said 2017 seems the best-case scenario. He said the possibility of the new road doesn't really help Silver attract new users to Celebrate Virginia, but he thinks it would certainly help existing businesses. He believes the biggest effect would be the overall regional transportation improvements.

The toll road authority produced the impact report of the interchange in fall 2010. The federally required report focused on



A car turns south on U.S. 1 from Butler Road at the congested Falmouth intersection.

how the new interchange would affect nearby roads and was reviewed by the highway administration.

Quintin Elliot, Virginia Department of Transportation Fredericksburg District Administrator and toll road authority member, said gaining such approval from the feds is not an easy thing to do.

"So this is a big success," he said during the meeting.

While officials seem to like the idea of the interchange, there has been opposition from residents who live where the new parkway would go.

Robinson said an important step in the planning process is to involve the public, especially those who could be affected by the project. The authority has already held public meetings on the project and will hold more, he said.

The toll road authority will vote in June to send out requests for proposals in a search for a contractor to oversee the next round of preliminary studies on the project.

Choosing the contractor to oversee that phase could take several months.

--Bill Freehling contributed to this story

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