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Planned Spotsy toll road troubles some

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Just about every area resident with a drivers license has grumbled their way through rush hour on State Route 3.

But a proposed solution might be worse than the problem, many Spotsylvania County residents argued last night.

Courtland Supervisor Jerry Logan hosted a town hall meeting about a proposed four-lane parkway connecting Interstate 95 to Gordon Road. This toll road would connect with an interchange at the Fredericksburg rest area and travel straight to Gordon Road with one stop at Celebrate Virginia.

Logan said he understood residents' reservations about the project and that he couldn't say for sure if he supported it, as no definite route has been settled on.

A map of the proposal shows two suggested paths for the parkway.

"A lot of clever engineers and planners looked at all the different ways we could connect to the interstate," said Paul Prideaux who helped lead a study on the proposal. "This is what's on the table now. It can always be adjusted as time goes on. That alignment is simply a pair of ideas."

Prideaux was one of six people on a panel which included the director of the George Washington Toll Road Authority, Spotsylvania's planning director and the county attorney.

Nearly 100 residents attended the town hall meeting held at Riverbend High School; 18 spoke.

A few of the speakers simply asked for more details: the cost, size and impact of the project.

Most voiced opposition.

And that opposition started with the study itself. The Michael Baker Jr. study was funded by the Virginia Department of Transportation, the Fredericksburg Area Metropolitan Planning Organization and the Silver Cos.

Many speakers had a bone to pick with the last contributor.

"Is it ethical to mix public funds and private funds for a public road?" Bob Taubert asked.

He--and several other speakers--pointed out that the Silver Cos. would benefit from the parkway, which would send traffic to the developers' Celebrate Virginia and Central Park commercial areas.

But that's just a new reality at a time when governments are hurting financially, Prideaux said after the meeting. Private companies helping to fund transportation studies are not uncommon, he said.

Speakers also wondered if the \$300-million road would even work.

The project's governing group, the George Washington Regional Toll Road Authority, can charge a maximum toll of \$1 under state regulations. Some residents felt that was \$1 more than area drivers would pay.

"I think we may be optimistic thinking people would pay a buck each way to save three minutes," Bryce Thorpe said.

It is still unclear just how much time the proposed road would shave off of a commute. Thorpe said he experimented with routes that could be close to the proposed parkway and felt sure that the toll road would save drivers about three minutes. Lloyd Robinson, interim director of the regional toll road authority, said the parkway could save as many as 15 minutes.

But many attendees worried less about the practicality of the road and more about its impact on landowners near the projected routes. Several asked if the county would condemn land if property owners wouldn't sell the rights of way for the project.

The meeting grew especially contentious when one homeowner brought up the Harrison Road connector, a once-proposed alternative to State Route 3, which would span from the mall to Harrison Road. That project has been scrapped, but it created ill-will among owners of land adjacent to the project. Another landowner said that the county had not yet paid her for land she agreed to give them for another road project. She also owns several acres in the path of the proposed parkway and told Logan, "This will ruin our lives."

The meeting was not overtly political but definitely had undertones as Logan's challenger for the Courtland seat, David Ross, has made the toll road a hot topic in the upcoming election.

In an interview yesterday afternoon, Ross said it wasn't the top issue but that the toll road was important. He said he didn't argue so much with the plan as with the process. Ross wondered why alternative plans hadn't been fully explored.

"My whole point is they didn't look at anything else," Ross said.

Last night, he asked about instead placing an I-95 interchange at Harrison Road. Other speakers also asked about that option.

Robinson said that a Harrison Road interchange wouldn't solve the same problems that the toll road would.

"It won't go anywhere," he said.

And some speakers wondered if any project was needed at all.

Thorpe said that he drives up and down State Route 3 just about every day.

"I understand that I have to wait in traffic," he said. "That's the price I pay to live out here and have a little peace and quiet."

Spotsylvania resident Rupert Farley told the panel that it didn't make sense to fix the traffic by building more roads.

"Paving your way out of congestion is like borrowing your way out of debt," he said.

A second town hall meeting on the proposed road will be held Oct. 17, 7 p.m. at the Harrison Road Community Center.