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Planning for toll road to begin

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By KELLY HANNON

A group of government officials must decide what skipping State Route 3 traffic is worth to drivers--35 cents a ride? 50 cents? \$1?

"Money is time," said Lloyd Robinson, Fredericksburg Area Metropolitan Planning Organization administrator.

The key to planning a new Interstate 95 exit near the Virginia Welcome Center in Fredericksburg, connected to a toll road bypassing Route 3 and ending at Gordon Road in Spotsylvania County, will be finding the "sweet spot" between traffic relief and revenue to pay for the road, Robinson said.

"The more you charge, the fewer people that are going to use the roadway," he said.

So far, based on early traffic models, charging a \$1 toll would have a big impact.

If the road were free, about 65,000 cars a day would take a Route 3 bypass from I-95 to Gordon Road. If drivers had to pay a \$1 toll, the use would drop to 30,000 to 35,000 cars.

But even with a toll, such relief could be significant.

About 76,000 vehicles a day travel Route 3 between Salem Church Road and Fredericksburg, according to the Virginia Department of Transportation.

Setting the price for using the interchange and toll road would fall to a new regional toll road authority, a board made up of Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania elected officials that is on the verge of forming.

A round of public hearings will give residents a chance to weigh in first on the authority's creation.

No public hearing dates have been scheduled yet, but attorneys for Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania are working to draft the required documents.

If it is formed, the toll road authority would have seven members. Each locality would be represented by three elected officials--members of the Fredericksburg City Council and Spotsylvania Board of Supervisors--plus the VDOT commissioner or his designee. Board members would serve three-year terms, except for the VDOT commissioner.

The board could build new highways only in the Route 3 corridor. It could enter into public-private partnerships and set toll rates.

CHECKS, BALANCES EXIST

What it could not do is set toll rates above \$1 without getting the permission of the full City Council and Board of Supervisors.

"There are huge checks and balances that governing bodies have to go through, and the public is fully informed and that's going to happen here," said Hap Connors, chairman of the Spotsylvania Board of Supervisors and FAMPO chairman.

But travelers should prepare for new state roads to possibly come with tolls, Connors said. "Until and unless Richmond fixes the transportation system, I think the public's going to see more of this type of endeavor," he said.

Earlier this year, the Virginia General Assembly passed a law, which was signed by Gov. Tim Kaine, creating the George Washington Toll Road Authority in the Fredericksburg area.

It would be the region's first foray into toll roads.

FAMPO supported the authority's creation. For two years, FAMPO has been studying whether a new interchange and toll road near the welcome center would be a feasible way to drain traffic away from car-clogged Route 3.

But FAMPO cannot levy tolls or launch construction of a toll road.

AUTHORITY SETS TOLLS

That must be done by a toll road authority. Other authorities in Virginia also have the power to set tolls. The Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority sets rates for the Dulles Toll Road, and the Richmond Metropolitan Authority sets tolls for the Powhite Parkway, Downtown Expressway and Boulevard Bridge.

With scant state money available to build or improve roads in Virginia, communities must take the initiative to solve their mobility challenges, Connors said.

"State leaders have advised us to work regionally, work on public-private partnerships and find alternative financing," Connors said. "This is what this toll road authority represents."

Matt Kelly, a former FAMPO chairman and current Fredericksburg city councilman, is even more direct. Given the dearth of money for road construction, he said, the interchange and bypass cannot be built without tolls. "At least not in our lifetime," Kelly said.

ONGOING WORK

Drivers are years away from using a new I-95 interchange and toll road, already nicknamed the "Spotsylvania Greenway."

All of the work connected to the project is in the feasibility stage, to see if state and federal officials

would even let such a project move ahead to more advanced planning.

FAMPO, VDOT and the Celebrate Virginia Community Development Authority are dividing the nearly \$400,000 cost of the feasibility plans.

Agency staff meet periodically to discuss how the project would affect traffic on I-95 and local roads, potential project routes, and cost estimates.

According to presentations shared with local government, drivers would be able to access land west of I-95 using the new interchange. No ramps or exits would carry traffic east toward downtown Fredericksburg.

Depending on the design, building a new interchange and toll road could cost \$250 million to \$265 million.

That's because the project would require improvements to the Rappahannock River bridge and the U.S. 17 interchange in Stafford. New traffic lanes would be needed for safe merging, and the two-lane Fall Hill Avenue overpass would have to be replaced.

NO DESIGN SELECTED

Committee staff have yet to pick a preferred design. Fredericksburg City Council and the Spotsylvania Board of Supervisors would also need to endorse any designs.

A few early routes have been floated.

For the interchange portion, one design concept has vehicles exiting I-95 between the Rappahannock River and the welcome center. The alternative is to build an interchange south of the welcome center, between the Fall Hill Avenue and Cowan Boulevard I-95 overpasses.

Both Spotsylvania Greenway designs connect to the interchange, cross River Road using an overpass, and reconnect with Route 3 at Gordon Road.

Spotsylvania Supervisor Jerry Logan said he will support the route that affects as few residential properties as possible. The toll road would fall mostly in Logan's district.

More than a decade ago, Logan sat on the Board of Supervisors and supported a bypass that was part of an Outer Connector proposal known as "Alternative 5."

The Outer Connector project died in the planning stages, but Logan is pleased to see his preferred route return. "I'm just tickled to death to see it move forward," he said.

Fredericksburg City Council and the Spotsylvania Board of Supervisors had heard presentations about the toll road authority, and both groups directed staff to schedule the required public hearings.

However, questions arose. During a City Council work session, several council members asked whether drivers would be allowed to use the I-95 interchange for free to access Celebrate Virginia, and then decide to pay a toll to continue along the bypass to Gordon Road.

"That's a discussion that once it's established, whoever is going to sit on that board are going to decide,"

Kelly said.

City Councilwoman Kerry Devine asked whether requiring a toll at the exit would defeat the purpose of improving Route 3 congestion. "If we charge a toll, do we sort of dilute the goal of getting cars off the road?" Devine asked.

Connors said several tolling concepts have been discussed, and that a healthy debate should incorporate many possibilities. "I think you're going to have a lot of different alternatives until we decide on a final resolution. Nobody should be alarmed right now by any discussion," Connors said.

Kelly said he thinks it makes sense to charge a toll for exiting at the interchange, and another toll for continuing on to use the Spotsylvania Greenway.

The decision would come down to the amount of money the authority wants to raise, Kelly said-- whether it wants to raise just enough to pay for the interchange and toll road, or enough to build other road projects.

"I hope we do understand the general dynamics here," Kelly said, "which is [that] transportation money is going to be fewer and further between, and I don't see any change coming down the line out of Richmond."

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