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Public has little to say on toll road authority

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By KELLY HANNON

Only one person turned out at a public hearing last night before Fredericksburg City Council on the launch of a regional toll road authority--and he lives outside the city.

Spotsylvania resident Rupert Farley told council members that he objects to the project the George Washington Toll Road Authority would aim to build.

As presented to the board, the project would be a \$250 million new Interstate 95 interchange near the Virginia Welcome Center that would connect to a toll road bypassing the most congested section of State Route 3, linking up again at Gordon Road in Spotsylvania.

"I'm not against tolls," Farley said. But he expressed a desire to see more funding directed at transit, and said building a new interchange will encourage more driving. "You can't pave your way out of congestion," Farley said.

Fredericksburg Councilman Matt Kelly addressed Farley's points after the hearing closed.

Kelly said a regional long-range transportation plan for the Fredericksburg area had done ample planning for public transit, trains and trails, but new interchanges are needed along one of the busiest stretches of I-95 on the East Coast.

"We do need to address that," Kelly said.

The four-lane toll road, as proposed, would have bicycle and pedestrian paths on both sides and lead to the Gordon Road commuter lot.

Council members voted unanimously to accept a first reading of the ordinance that would implement the George Washington Toll Road Authority. A previous vote to table the first reading failed 6-1, with Councilman George Solley voting to table. Solley said unanswered questions remained on the project, and he wanted to give the public more opportunity to comment.

"I simply don't feel a need to hurry up and vote on that," Solley said.

Councilman Hashmel Turner said he supported the project, and Councilman Brad Ellis said he had no objections moving ahead with the first reading. "We're simply beginning what will undoubtedly be a lengthy process," Ellis said.

The George Washington Toll Road Authority was created in a bill passed by the Virginia General Assembly in 2009, but the law leaves the decision to assemble the group up to elected officials in Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania, where the authority would have power to build highways near Route 3 and charge tolls to use them.

If the authority moves ahead, it would have seven members. Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania would each be represented by three elected officials--City Council members and county supervisors--plus the Virginia Department of Transportation commissioner or his designee. Board members would serve three-year terms, except for the VDOT

commissioner.

Fredericksburg City Council and the Spotsylvania Board of Supervisors must adopt local ordinances to assemble the group. Before it can, each body must hold two public hearings.

The second hearing in Fredericksburg has not been scheduled yet.

Yesterday, the Spotsylvania Board of Supervisors set public hearings on the toll road authority for April 13 and May 11.

Building an interchange so close to the Rappahannock River Bridge would require adding four lanes to Interstate 95 over the river and improving the U.S. 17 interchange in Stafford.

Combined, all the traffic improvements would reduce traffic on Route 3 by 30 percent near the current I-95 interchange, shifting about 30,000 cars a day to the toll road.

In 2035, the project would return traffic conditions to 2008 levels, said Lloyd Robinson, administrator of the Fredericksburg Area Metropolitan Planning Organization.

FAMPO has been working with the Virginia Department of Transportation and federal highway officials to study the project before seeking federal approval.

The 2008 comparison gave one council member pause, especially next to the \$250 million price tag.

"I'm not sure 2008 levels are something to aspire to," said Vice Mayor Kerry Devine.

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