

Single I-95 toll location possible

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BY SCOTT SHENK

If tolls are added to Interstate 95 according to preliminary plans, Fredericksburg-area drivers won't have much to worry about.

A preliminary Virginia Department of Transportation plan calls for just one toll station, or gantry, to be built on I-95, according to Quintin Elliott, VDOT's Fredericksburg District administrator, who gave a presentation to the George Washington Regional Commission Monday night.

That toll location could be south of Petersburg, in Sussex County.

The through-traffic toll would be \$4 for two-axle vehicles and would have cash and electronic options. Exit ramps in that area would carry smaller tolls.

VDOT estimates that the new tolls could generate \$35 million to \$40 million annually. Other tolling options could produce \$55 million to \$160 million a year, but those options are much more extensive, including one that would put six toll gantries along the interstate at 20-mile intervals.

Virginia is part of a federal pilot program allowing it and two other states to toll interstates.

Elliott pointed out that the tolls are one way to help pay for work needed on Interstate 95.

VDOT estimates that it will take \$12.1 billion over 25 years to fix the state's aging interstate system. Several billion dollars have been set aside to do some of that work, but there is a "\$9.6 billion funding gap," Elliott said.

The system's pavement and bridges need much of the work, according to VDOT.

Some 80 percent of the interstate's bridges are older than 40 years, and 72 percent of the pavement needs to be fixed, according to VDOT's report. By 2035, the department estimates, travel times will increase by 40 percent, causing congestion that will only get worse without repairs and upgrades to the interstate infrastructure.

According to Elliott's presentation, if the state were to use the tolls to fill the entire \$9.6 billion funding gap, drivers would have to pay 53 cents per mile.

VDOT's proposed toll fee amounts to 2 cents per mile, according to the department.

VDOT is considering setting up the toll system under a 30-year plan. There also would be an option, Elliott added, to put the toll program "out to contract," which means a private company could eventually handle the tolls.

Within a few years, express lanes will be added to the median along I-95 north of Fredericksburg. Those lanes will include a toll for vehicles with fewer than three occupants. That toll road will be operated by the private company Fluor-Transurban.

Tim McLaughlin, a member of the Spotsylvania Board of Supervisors, GWRC and the Fredericksburg Area Metropolitan Planning Organization, asked Elliott if more tolls than the one gantry might be added along the interstate.

“There could be a potential option for more tolls,” Elliott said.

VDOT plans to get an application in for the toll proposal this summer. Then the department expects to hold public hearings in the fall.

An agreement on the toll project could be signed off on this winter.

There is no schedule for when the tolls would take effect.

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