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Two plans weighed for new I-95 exit

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By KELLY HANNON

Both designs for a new Interstate 95 interchange near the Virginia Welcome Center in Fredericksburg have advantages and drawbacks, according to a presentation on the plans.

One route would have vehicles exit I-95 at a new interchange between the Rappahannock River and the Welcome Center.

The other possible route would place the new interchange south of the rest area, between the Fall Hill Avenue and Cowan Boulevard I-95 overpasses.

Putting the interchange closer to the river could affect a stream, parking at a proposed museum site and undeveloped commercial property.

But choosing the southern route would affect existing businesses and homes, and create a divider between shopping areas.

Traffic modeling shows both designs improve traffic flow on State Route 3, though, and neither will worsen conditions on I-95, said Lloyd Robinson, director of transportation planning for the George Washington Regional Commission.

"We don't see any fatal flaws in this," Robinson said. "We're helping the interstate, not hurting it."

A committee of elected officials from Fredericksburg, Stafford and Spotsylvania reviewed both options last night at a monthly board meeting of the Fredericksburg Area Metropolitan Planning Organization.

FAMPO has been overseeing a feasibility study of the potential interchange.

According to the presentation, the interchange could connect with a new four-lane toll road that bypasses congested State Route 3.

The toll road would terminate at Route 3 and Gordon Road in Spotsylvania.

Building the interchange and toll road would cost an estimated \$250 to \$265 million, Robinson said.

The price tag includes the cost of widening the Rappahannock River bridge several lanes, which will be necessary for acceleration and deceleration lanes and merging space. It also covers the cost of minor upgrades at the U.S. 17 interchange in Stafford.

The Fall Hill Avenue overpass must be widened, too. Neither interchange design would affect the Cowan Boulevard bridge, which opened in 2005.

No decisions have been made yet on what drivers would pay to use the toll road.

The Virginia General Assembly passed a bill earlier this year that created the George Washington Toll Road Authority.

This allows Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania to form a toll road authority to oversee the construction of the toll road and interchange, if it chooses to advance the project.

The toll road authority would have to make decisions on project funding and toll amounts, and whether vehicles carrying three people or more would be allowed on the toll road for free, Robinson said.

This summer, a steering committee working on the interchange study will choose one of the two designs as a preferred alternative, Robinson said.

That recommendation will be presented to local governments in the Fredericksburg area, where concerns can be addressed, Robinson said. Ultimately the FAMPO board will also be asked to settle on an alternative.

After that, all documents will be submitted to the Virginia Department of Transportation and the Federal Highway Administration for approval.

Robinson said he hopes to hear a response by fall. Once federal approval is secured, a more intensive design and environmental review process could begin.

Kelly Hannon: 540/374-5436

Email: khannon@freelancestar.com