

# Transportation summit singles out problems with I-95, funding

BY SCOTT SHENK | Posted: Tuesday, August 18, 2015 12:00 am

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THE FREE LANCE-STAR

A Monday summit focused on transportation covered some of the area's most pressing issues.

Just like the experience of many drivers in and through the Fredericksburg region, Interstate 95 was the sticking point.

The consensus at the summit, hosted by the Fredericksburg Regional Chamber of Commerce, seemed clear: The consistently congested interstate is more than just a local concern.

Several speakers and attendees said I-95 is a problem that deserves not only a state response but federal action.

The summit's first speaker, Virginia Department of Transportation Commissioner Charlie Kilpatrick, pointed out how "horrendous" traffic was on the interstate over the weekend. He wasn't stuck in it, but the Spotsylvania resident saw the congestion from the overpasses.

He wasn't the only one to mention the weekend traffic on I-95.

One of the moderators, Joe Wilson, owner of PermaTreat and a former Fredericksburg City Council member, said he was stuck in the interstate congestion. He said it took him an hour and 45 minutes to get from Quantico to Fredericksburg.

Kilpatrick told the crowd of several dozen at Germanna Community College's Spotsylvania campus that problems on 95 impact the area's other roads, too.

He said that changes to how transportation projects get approved, such as a new state prioritization program, should help get needed road work done in the coming years.



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Caroline Supervisor Jeff Sili (left), Stafford Supervisor Gary Snellings and Spotsylvania Supervisor Paul Trampe answer questions during a regional transportation summit sponsored by the Fredericksburg Regional Chamber of Commerce on Monday.

The commissioner and others mentioned the Rappahannock River Crossing, a proposed project that would add collector–distributor lanes along 95 between U.S. 17 in Stafford County and State Route 3 in Fredericksburg.

The Fredericksburg Area Metropolitan Planning Organization has pegged the crossing as the area’s top project for the prioritization program.

Kilpatrick noted another interstate project that was supposed to improve traffic: the express lanes.

“Some people love them, some people hate them,” he said.

The VDOT commissioner said the Garrisonville choke point where traffic gets on and off the lanes has proven to be a problem. It’s something the highway department and Transurban, the company that manages the electronically tolled lanes, are looking into.

Charles McDaniel, long-time owner of Hilldrup Moving & Storage, said the express lanes have had a “disastrous” impact in North Stafford, clogging the interstate and roads around the moving company’s U.S. 1 office building.

The area’s Commonwealth Transportation Board representative also spoke during the summit.

There may be more money and potentially an improved planning process in place, said Hap Connors, but the state is still “playing catch-up.”

He explained that over time, the infrastructure deteriorated while the state failed to do needed work. So instead of improving the transportation system, he said the state is now trying to fix a broken one.

Connors said I–95 is a crisis that should be handled on a federal level.

He also said more innovation is needed if the area and state hope to improve transportation system.

Connors and Fredericksburg Councilman Matt Kelly said funding problems are still a roadblock.

Both said area transportation leaders need to consider creating a regional transportation authority. Such an entity would be able to create tax programs to raise transportation funds.

Northern Virginia and Hampton Roads have raised millions of dollars with such authorities.

During a question and answer period, one person asked Kelly and Stafford Supervisor Gary Snellings if they would support the old western outer connector project, designed to connect U.S. 17 and Route 3.

The controversial proposal was pulled from the table in the early 2000s.

Both said they would support the project.

Kelly said the outer connector will eventually be built.

“It’s not a question of if we’re going to do it, but when,” he said.

Snellings said the connector would have helped solve congestion on U.S. 17 and I-95.

He added that the outer connector is a microcosm of the state’s poor transportation planning, which for decades allowed projects to be approved and then nixed.

Earlier during the summit, Kilpatrick pointed out that the prioritization program should fix that issue.

McDaniel closed out the summit by excoriating the federal government for not fully funding transportation needs.

He also said residents need to become more involved, primarily by holding elected officials accountable for not being proactive enough with such things as the federal gas tax.

McDaniel said the one way to get “immediate results” is to raise the federal gas tax.

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