

Fix for I-95 choke point in the works, but express lanes extension in doubt

BY SCOTT SHENK/THE FREE LANCE-STAR | Posted: Friday, August 21, 2015 12:00 am

Virginia Department of Transportation Commissioner Charlie Kilpatrick says his agency is looking at ways to fix backups where the new Interstate 95 express lanes end in North Stafford.

At a local transportation summit earlier this week, Kilpatrick noted that while the express lanes have been a mixed bag for drivers since opening in December, no one seems to like the merge point in Garrisonville. It's possible that the merger with regular I-95 lanes could be moved south of the current location, which is just north of State Route 610, he said.

No details are ready at this point. But by the fall, Kilpatrick said, the highway department expects to know if something can be done and how much it would cost.

If something can be done, he said it could happen early next year.

Meanwhile, hopes for a long-term solution in the form of an extension of the express lanes to Spotsylvania County seem to be fading.

The express lanes project extended the old High Occupancy Vehicle system from Dumfries to Garrisonville and converted the lanes running along the median to an electronically tolled system.

The new lanes—a public-private project paid for mostly by Fluor-Lane and Transurban, the operator of the toll lanes—were hailed as an improvement to the highly traveled commuter route from the Fredericksburg area to Northern Virginia.

Data compiled by VDOT and Transurban earlier this summer indeed showed improved speeds in the corridor along the entire stretch of the 29-mile express lanes, from Garrisonville to Franconia Road.

But other statistics showed that, as expected, the Dumfries choke point had moved south to Stafford.

A report compiled by the Fredericksburg Area Metropolitan Planning Organization showed drastic delays in the main lanes south and north of Garrisonville.

The report compared speeds on the main I-95 lanes from August to November last year with February to May this year.

In the mornings, the slowdown started at Stafford's Centreport Parkway, where the average speed dropped from about 63 mph to 48 mph. At Stafford's Courthouse Road exit, the speed dropped by more than 17 mph to an average of about 35 mph.

At the Route 610 exit near the express lanes merge, speeds dropped from the already slow rate of

about 40 mph to about 31 mph.

The express lanes haven't helped with weekend congestion on I-95 in the Fredericksburg area, either, as big northbound backups have been a common occurrence this summer.

While there is hope that the express lanes will eventually be extended to the Massaponax area, Kilpatrick said at Monday's summit that it will be a challenge.

"It's a matter of money," he said.

Studies indicate that toll revenue won't support the cost to extend the express lanes, Kilpatrick said. He said it would cost \$30 million to \$40 million a mile to add the lanes, and that doesn't include a bridge that would have to be built between the current spans across the Rappahannock River.

The answer, he said, might be adding a fourth, reversible lane instead of extending the express lanes.