

Stafford supervisors angered by state transportation officials' perceived disregard for congestion problems

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

A pair of Stafford County supervisors have called out the state and highway officials, saying they have mismanaged congestion problems on Interstate 95.

They point specifically to the Garrisonville-area merger for the I-95 express lanes, which has been a traffic mess since the electronically tolled lanes opened in December. They are upset that the potential cure to that problem—extending the lanes south to Massaponax—seems to have been discarded.

“We’re the forgotten region,” said Supervisor Paul Milde, who represents the Aquia District.

During last week’s supervisors meeting, Milde inserted a late addition into a resolution on which projects to submit for the state’s new prioritization program. The add-on asks the Virginia Department of Transportation to conduct a study on the potential for extending the express lanes from Stafford to Massaponax and to update revenue options to pay for it.

Milde and fellow Supervisor Cord Sterling were pointed in their criticism of state transportation leaders. The ire of Stafford officials has been a running theme since the inception of the Virginia Department of Transportation’s prioritization program, which stripped more than \$100 million from local projects.

During the meeting, Sterling, the area’s former Commonwealth Transportation Board representative, characterized the state’s handling of highway projects in the region as “gross mismanagement.”

Both Sterling and Milde said the express lanes work well, but only north of the Fredericksburg area.

And they are especially upset that the extension of the express lanes to Massaponax seems to have been shelved.

They said the project had funding in long-range transportation plans, but now VDOT claims that the extension may be too expensive to build. The supervisors want to know what happened and what can be done about it.

At an August transportation summit, VDOT Commissioner Charlie Kilpatrick raised doubts about the extension, saying it’s unclear how it would be funded. He added that studies indicate that toll revenue wouldn’t support the cost.

The current I-95 express lanes, which cost nearly \$1 billion to build, were paid for through a public-private partnership based on the expectation that tolls would pay for the investment, and then some.

After Milde pressed VDOT for information on the issue, the agency said its toll revenue data was a decade old, according to an email to Milde from Fredericksburg Area Metropolitan Planning Organization Administrator Paul Agnello.

“The state completely dropped the ball” on the extension of the express lanes, Milde said. “We’re asking them to pick the ball back up.”

The only funding the project has ever received was devoted to environmental work, according to local VDOT spokeswoman Kelly Hannon. She said the project is listed as fully funded in the FAMPO’s constrained long-range plan, which “forecasts future revenues from federal, state, local and other sources for transportation.”

Fredericksburg City Councilman Matt Kelly, a veteran FAMPO representative, said that when local officials asked where the funding for the extension would come from state officials said they would find it.

“That was the commitment to the southern HOT lanes,” Kelly said.

He said the problem is emblematic of how the state plans for transportation projects.

Milde contends that VDOT is “not even trying” to find a way to extend the express lanes.

Hannon said VDOT is concerned about the congestion problems at the North Stafford merger and is looking at ways to fix it. The highway department plans to unveil a plan later this year.

The highway department apparently is working on a plan that would extend the express lanes to a merge point about two miles south of its current location, according to officials familiar with discussions on the issue.

There also is a proposal to add a fourth lane to each side of the interstate between the State Route 610 and Centreport Parkway exits. Funding was cut from those plans as part of the prioritization program.

The Stafford supervisors want FAMPO to include the fourth-lane project in its list to be scored in the prioritization program.

FAMPO is set to vote on the region’s prioritization project list at Monday night’s regular meeting.

Milde said that adding the fourth lanes would help, but extending the express lanes “is the real solution” to congestion problems.

And he said using a public-private partnership “is pretty much our only option. It’s the only thing that makes sense.”