

FAMPO considers problems and fixes for express lanes

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

The Virginia Department of Transportation has unveiled a plan to help deal with congestion around the Interstate 95 express lanes merge in North Stafford, but regional officials want more to be done to fix problems they say are caused by the new toll road.

Most of Monday night's Fredericksburg Area Metropolitan Planning Organization meeting was focused on how to fix the congestion problems that started after the electronically-tolled express lanes opened in December.

During the meeting, the FAMPO Policy Committee saw results from a before-and-after speed study of the express lanes, VDOT laid out details of a short-term fix at the express lanes merge, and the committee voted to pursue an I-95 corridor study.

FAMPO's new speed study covered the main lanes from the Massaponax area to the Springfield exit. It produced findings similar to earlier studies by FAMPO and VDOT that showed slower travel times around the merge and to the south. Findings in the spring by Transurban, the company that has a long-term contract to operate the lanes, showed improved travel times for express lanes users north of the area.

The new FAMPO results show that delays are "significantly worse" in the area around the merge, as well as to the south. The figures were compiled from May through July in 2014 and 2015 and focused on morning and evening peak times.

VDOT and Transurban have been working on plans to extend the merge south of State Route 610 in North Stafford County. Local VDOT Administrator Marcie Parker showed preliminary details of the plans Monday.

The plans call for extending the left-side ramp for northbound express lanes traffic while adding a left-side ramp for southbound express-lanes traffic to use as a merge back onto I-95's main lanes.

The changes would move the merge area about 2.5 miles south of where it is now, not far from



Interstate 95

Northbound traffic approaches the exit for U.S. 1 near the Occoquan River on Thursday, Jan. 22, 2015.

Stafford's Courthouse Road exit, which itself will soon be rebuilt.

The extension of the ramps is expected to help decrease congestion and reduce weaving traffic patterns around the merger.

VDOT and Transurban will pay for the work, which could start in late 2016. VDOT will use some of the \$20 million left over from its portion of the express lanes construction costs.

FAMPO committee members, who were highly critical of Transurban because of the merge problems, want the project done sooner.

Hap Connors, the area's representative on the Commonwealth Transportation Board, said Transurban needs to be held accountable for the congestion issues. He said the committee should write a letter telling state officials that Transurban should fix the problems in Stafford before the Australian-based company is considered for a proposed express lanes project on Interstate 66.

The committee agreed and voted to write the letter.

The FAMPO committee, which believes more than the short express lanes extension improvements are needed to fix I-95's congestion problems, also considered plans for a multi-modal corridor study at Monday's meeting. The study would cover a 20-mile stretch of the interstate from Massaponax to North Stafford.

The study will pinpoint problems and identify potential major and smaller projects on and around the interstate.

FAMPO Administrator Paul Agnello said the organization hopes to have the study completed by June or July. Committee members asked him to try to have it ready sooner because they consider the study integral to planning for the next round of the state's new prioritization funding program.