

# Editorial: Rappahannock River Crossing should be state priority, too

BY THE EDITORIAL PAGE STAFF OF THE FREE LANCE-STAR | Posted: Tuesday, January 12, 2016 12:00 am

More than two years ago, Virginia's secretary of transportation urged Fredericksburg-area officials to put aside their differences and get behind the Interstate 95 Rappahannock River Crossing project.

The massive \$277 million project would add bridges over the Rappahannock and more lanes to separate through and local traffic between the interchanges at U.S. 17 at Falmouth and State Route 3, which serves the city and Spotsylvania.

“This has gone from being an issue of local concern to one of statewide concern,” said Sean Connaughton, who oversaw the Virginia Department of Transportation under Gov. Bob McDonnell. During a visit to the area in September 2013, he said the area's I-95 choke points are “causing major problems,” and the dispute involving local officials had “gone on too long.”

It's interesting that Connaughton made those comments even before the I-95 Express Lanes were extended into North Stafford last year. Terminating the high-occupancy toll lanes just north of the Aquia/Garrisonville interchange has made Stafford a morning and evening commuter choke point. Traffic is often backed up now on holiday weekends and during the summer travel season.

Elected leaders of Stafford, Spotsylvania and Fredericksburg ultimately heeded Connaughton's advice, and have placed the Rappahannock Crossing project at the top the list. They reached that consensus after dropping part of the project—a controversial parkway that would run from the Virginia Welcome Center on I-95 and tie into Route 3 west near Gordon Road in Spotsylvania. Even without the parkway, Connaughton said adding the bridges and collector-distributor lanes alongside the main stem of I-95 will ease congestion.

Fast forward to the present. Next week, the Virginia Department of Transportation will release the



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The original Rappahannock River Crossing project would have connected a parkway with State Route 3 at the Gordon Road intersection.

list of top priorities for new highway construction across the state.

Will the Rappahannock River Crossing project make the cut?

We certainly hope so.

Since Secretary Connaughton's pronouncement of the I-95 problem here, a new governor has taken office, a another transportation secretary appointed and the legislature passed House Bill 2. The law aims to direct the limited state and federal construction money to projects that will make the most difference without political interference.

The prioritization program scores projects based on several factors: reducing congestion, stimulating the economy, enhancing access to jobs and improving safety. Environmental impacts and land use are also important.

Virginia's current Secretary of Transportation Aubrey Lane has said prioritization will be more "transparent," and holds the Commonwealth Transportation Board accountable for its decisions about which road projects get funded.

This is a laudable goal. Obviously, many of the projects will not receive funding in the coming years. VDOT went through 321 projects with a price tag of \$6.95 billion as part of the process under HB 2. However, only about \$1 billion is available.

The CTB will select which projects to include in the next Six-Year Improvement Program by June. Additional public meetings will be held on the plan in the spring.

Building additional I-95 bridges over the Rappahannock River here is a major undertaking that will take years to complete. It's a project that shouldn't be delayed as VDOT and regional transportation planners work on plans to extend the express lanes or make other improvements to ease congestion on I-95, the East Coast's Main Street.