

Fredericksburg area officials strip fourth I-95 lane from transportation wish list

BY SCOTT SHENK/THE FREE LANCE-STAR | Posted: Wednesday, September 23, 2015

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The state's new prioritization program was supposed to streamline the transportation planning process and rein in political gamesmanship.

But so far in the Fredericksburg region, transportation leaders continue to struggle through the process, which allows localities to submit top-ranked projects to be scored by set criteria.

The first batch of prioritization projects will compete for \$1.2 billion in state funding.

Fredericksburg-area localities have zeroed in on several projects to submit to the state by the Sept. 30 deadline, but the process has been anything but smooth.

During the Fredericksburg Area Metropolitan Planning Organization's meeting Monday, policy committee members and Virginia Department of Transportation officials wrestled over including a request to add a fourth lane to Interstate 95 to be scored in the program.

The \$55 million project would add an outside lane on each side of I-95 between the State Route 610 and Centreport Parkway exits in Stafford County.

The project was included in a resolution along with the Rappahannock River Crossing, which would add collector-distributor lanes on I-95. The George Washington Regional Commission selected three other smaller projects to submit at its meeting earlier Monday.

Fredericksburg City Councilman Matt Kelly wanted to know how the fourth-lane project got on the list submitted to FAMPO without the policy committee ever having talked about including it.

FAMPO Administrator Paul Agnello said a local VDOT official called him and asked that the project be added to the list. He said he was told the "request came from Richmond."

Kelly bristled at that notion.

"Out of the box, the state is changing the rules," said Kelly, a critic of the prioritization program since its inception.



Interstate 95

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

Marcie Parker, VDOT's Fredericksburg District administrator, denied that the agency pushed to add the fourth-lane project to the list.

"All I see is hearsay," she said.

Stafford Supervisor Paul Milde said the state asked the county's Board of Supervisors to endorse the fourth-lane project, "and we did."

Jason Robinson, a program management director with VDOT's Fredericksburg District, said Stafford officials asked for information on the fourth lane project in August, and from there it made its way to FAMPO.

He also said a fourth-lane proposal has been on the books for years.

That proposed project was among those to suffer funding cuts as part of the prioritization program.

Lloyd Robinson, a FAMPO policy specialist, pointed out that the previous project was smaller in scope than the one on the prioritization list.

Committee Chairman Tim McLaughlin, a Spotsylvania County supervisor, said it appeared there was a breakdown in the process. He then asked for a vote.

Kelly moved to pass the resolution without the fourth-lane project.

Milde and Stafford's other two FAMPO representatives, who wanted to keep the project on the list, voted against the resolution. But the committee passed Kelly's resolution, 4-3, with two abstentions.

In other business, the policy committee passed a resolution to support Stafford's request that VDOT study the potential for extending the express lanes from Stafford to Massaponax and to update revenue options to pay for it.

Milde has been critical of VDOT, saying the electronically tolled highway's merger in North Stafford has created a congestion mess in that area and to the south since the lanes opened in December. He said the highway department doesn't want to extend the lanes, which he said would fix the problem.

VDOT officials have given conflicting answers on the potential cost of the extension, as well as toll revenue data that is considered to be a way to help pay for an extension.

Others on the policy committee also criticized VDOT and the express lanes merger congestion.

Stafford Supervisor Laura Sellers said the interstate congestion causes problems on other North Stafford roads, too.

McLaughlin said the highway department created a problem it needs to fix.

"I still think VDOT broke the HOT lanes," he said.

"The way this was handled drives me nuts," Kelly said.

Hap Connors, the area's Commonwealth Transportation Board representative, said a corridor study should be conducted to look at all possible solutions to congestion caused by I-95 traffic, not just an express lanes extension.

"Who says HOT lanes are the answer?" he said.

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