

I-95 dominates local traffic forum

BY SCOTT SHENK/THE FREE LANCE-STAR | Posted: Sunday, November 22, 2015 12:00 am

The second in a series of traffic forums held on Thursday was dominated by the area's transportation leviathan — Interstate 95.

Local transportation leaders tackled major issues, and some new developments, regarding congestion on and around the interstate. It was described as a brewing “transportation crisis” by Susan Spears, the president and CEO of the Fredericksburg Regional Chamber of Commerce, which hosted the forum at Gari Melcher's Belmont Estate.

The topics ranged from the express lanes merge problem in North Stafford to the \$280,000 I-95 corridor study and the creation of regional transportation tax districts.

Money was the key issue, with the consensus being that there isn't enough to go around, so new approaches are needed.

Stafford Supervisor Paul Milde said the interstate is a multi-billion-dollar issue that “is a national problem, certainly a state problem.”

Fredericksburg council member Matt Kelly said the state is already \$10 billion behind in just maintaining the traffic status quo and that all the “screaming” and “letter writing” to state and federal representatives won't fix things.

He and Hap Connors, the area's Commonwealth Transportation Board representative, said other approaches are needed, including the possibility of creating a transportation tax district like Hampton Roads and Northern Virginia have used to raise millions.

Spotsylvania Supervisor Tim McLaughlin's suggestion for alternative congestion fixes was to reverse the commute by moving government contractor jobs south of the area.

Moderator Joe Wilson, owner of PermaTreat and a former Fredericksburg City Council member, asked the panel to talk about why, when money is so tight, the Fredericksburg Area Metropolitan Planning Organization approved the I-95 corridor study.



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Congestion on Interstate 95 is a daily occurrence for local commuters.

Paul Agnello, FAMPO's administrator, said such a comprehensive study hasn't been done in modern times.

He and other panelists said the study also would help pinpoint future projects to submit for funding under the state's new prioritization program.

In the end, the transportation problem "all comes down to funding," said Connors. "We can build anything you want — this is America — but how do you pay for it?"

The panelists agreed that residents need to be involved in the process, both by helping determine the best approach to area transportation challenges and by forcing elected officials to make the tough, and right, decisions.

The chamber plans to hold more transportation forums, with the next one tentatively slated for early next year.