

Proposed higher speed rail line could include eastern bypass around city

BY SCOTT SHENK/THE FREE LANCE-STAR | Posted: Thursday, December 10, 2015 12:00 am

An outer bypass might be coming to the Fredericksburg after all, just not in the form of a highway. Instead, as part of a proposed multi-billion-dollar higher speed train network, an eastern rail bypass might be built around the city.

Details of the alternatives for the proposed 123-mile Richmond-to-Washington segment of the Southeast High Speed Rail line were unveiled Tuesday night at the Dorothy Hart Community Center in Fredericksburg. The local segment would be part of a high-speed rail corridor from Florida to the Northeast Corridor, the only one of its kind in the nation.

“We’re halfway through the process,” said the Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation’s Emily Stock, who is the project manager for the higher speed rail line.

She said the first half of the planning process included the development of alternatives for the route.

The next step is to produce an environmental impact statement. During this next phase, officials will create more detailed designs of the alternatives and the impact they would have on the surrounding areas.

“We want to make sure we’re on the right path,” said Stock.

Wednesday’s meeting was the third focused on the Richmond-to-Washington corridor. Nearly 60 people attended the meeting, where they got a chance to see preliminary designs, talk to officials and listen to a presentation by Stock.

At this point, there are three alternatives for the higher speed rail line in the Fredericksburg area.

One option would be to add no additional track, which means there would be no way to increase capacity.

A second alternative would add a third track in or near the existing tracks’ right-of-way, which on average would put it about about 30 feet from the current tracks.

That option would take the new third track through the downtown station. To do that, the station platforms would be modified and expanded.

Also, a bridge would have to be built next to the current span over the Rappahannock River to accommodate the extra rail line.

The third alternative would include the construction of the eastern bypass, which would be primarily geared to divert freight trains and allow the higher speed trains to go through downtown.

There are speed restrictions in and around the city, so the trains would not be running at top speeds. Passenger trains would also be able to use the bypass.

The preliminary layout has the bypass running through mostly undeveloped and industrial areas.

The bypass rail would cross State Route 3 and U.S. 2 and 17. The southern end would connect with the main line tracks near Summit Crossing Road in Spotsylvania County and the northern end would meet with the main line near Forest Lane Road in Stafford County.

A bridge would have to be built over the Rappahannock River for the bypass, too.

Another facet of the project would include straightening curves of the existing rail lines as a way to allow the higher-speed trains to stay close to their top speeds of 90 mph. Current top speeds are 70 mph.

Officials estimate that the higher-speed line would add nine round trips to train traffic through the area and shorten those trips between Richmond and Washington by 15 to 20 minutes.

Waterways and urban areas are a particular design challenge in the Fredericksburg area, Stock told the crowd.

Questions from the audience covered a range of topics, including what impact the faster and increased train traffic would have on those living near the tracks. Stock said the next phase of studies will analyze the expected noise and vibration that would be created by the expanded train traffic.

Some also wondered if the system could be up and running before the expected 2026 completion.

Stock said officials are looking for ways to do some work sooner, perhaps building sections in phases.

More public meetings on the project are planned, with the next one in Fredericksburg tentatively scheduled for late next year.