

Stafford supervisor rents billboard to get commuters' views on traffic

BY SCOTT SHENK/THE FREE LANCE-STAR | Posted: Saturday, December 5, 2015 12:00 am

A new sign went up recently along Interstate 95 in North Stafford.

It's not one of those newfangled digital boards alerting drivers to how long it will take to get to Northern Virginia or the price of tolls on the express lanes.

Instead, it's a simple black billboard with white text, a concoction arranged by Stafford County Supervisor Paul Milde.

The Aquia supervisor rented the billboard in his ever-growing crusade to find a fix for I-95 congestion problems.

"STUCK IN TRAFFIC?" reads the billboard, which stands just south of the State Route 610 exit. It then implores drivers to send texts about their experience, "but not while you're driving."

Milde is not alone in his criticism of transportation planning. Other area elected officials have echoed his concern and agitation over congestion on the interstate and the traffic woes that causes.

But he's the only local official to actually take the fight to the street.

"I think there are a lot of unhappy commuters," Milde said recently, adding that the billboard is one way he plans to encourage people to voice their views on transportation. He also intends to include a social media component using Facebook and Twitter.

"It's an interesting way to go," said Matt Kelly, a Fredericksburg council member who sits on several transportation boards. "Any effort that's used to inform or solicit input from the public is a good thing."

Local transportation officials have been going round and round recently on several key issues, including a new statewide transportation funding program and the congestion problems that popped up following the opening of the I-95 express lanes nearly a year ago.



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A billboard along North Bound Interstate 95 near exit 143A in Stafford on Thursday, Nov. 19.

Milde was one of those singing the early praises of the express lanes improvements for travelers north of the area, where the electronically tolled lanes have improved traffic flow. But, since congestion problems became clear at the tolled lanes merge area in Stafford and to the south, he has continued to ramp up his push for a fix.

The state recently announced plans to extend and make changes to the merge. Work is likely to start next year and take two years to complete.

Officials say the extension will help improve the bottleneck that even Gov. Terry McAuliffe has described as “just a total congestion mess.”

The Virginia Department of Transportation’s plan would extend 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.

Milde doesn’t think the merge will fix the problem and said a state analysis suggests as much.

He and others want bigger fixes, such as extending the express lanes to Spotsylvania and the addition of a fourth lane on the interstate’s shoulder in Stafford.

They have stated their cases at meetings and in letters to state and federal officials.

Now Milde is using a different, very public tactic in an attempt to get officials’ attention on the area’s traffic concerns, something he says will allow people “to speak with one voice.”