

Virginia transportation leaders explain prioritization program

BY SCOTT SHENK/THE FREE LANCE-STAR | Posted: Friday, November 13, 2015 12:00 am

The state needs to do something differently to get its transportation infrastructure back to where it should be, Virginia's Secretary of Transportation said at a public hearing in Spotsylvania Thursday night for a new transportation prioritization program.

Secretary Aubrey Lane said the new program, known as House Bill 2, is one way the state is trying to take on the right projects.

He said other approaches also are needed to help improve a transportation infrastructure that hasn't had significant investment since the 1960s.

Tolls and public-private partnerships are all potential avenues to additional funding, of which there is simply not enough to go around, Layne said.

"We still have significantly more needs than we have funds to pay for them," Layne said.

As proof of that, he pointed to more than 350 applications totaling \$7 billion that were sent in to be scored for the prioritization program. The program will divvy up about \$1.2 billion for projects statewide in this first round. The Fredericksburg District accounted for 22 project applications totaling about \$370 million.

Thursday's public hearing at the Germanna Community College Center for Workforce & Community Education was one of nine this month across the state.

The state's transportation prioritization program will score projects according to established criteria. It is designed to remove much of the politics that have plagued transportation planning in the past, Layne said.

He and Charlie Kilpatrick, the Virginia Department of Transportation commissioner, said the most important project for the region is the Rappahannock River Crossing, which the Fredericksburg Area Metropolitan Planning Organization picked as the top project to be sent to the state for scoring.

"I think that's a very important project," Layne said. "We know [Interstate 95] is a very important



Transportation leaders explain prioritization program

State Transportation Secretary Aubrey Layne answers questions at Thursday night's transportation board meeting.

corridor to deal with.”

The crossing project would add collector-distributor lanes along I-95 from near the U.S. 17 interchange in Stafford to the State Route 3 interchange in Fredericksburg. The project would cost an estimated \$270 million to complete.

Transportation officials fielded about a half-dozen questions from the 16 residents who attended the hearing. The questions ranged from the possibility of raising gas taxes to the potential of building an outer bypass and creating a special tax district like those in Hampton Roads and Northern Virginia. The possibility of adding high-speed rail also came up.

Hap Connors, the Fredericksburg District’s Commonwealth Transportation Board representative, said there “needs to be an honest conversation” about creating such a tax district as a way for the district to pull in money for local projects.

Both Connors and Layne pointed to the need for a multi-modal approach because transportation problems can’t be fixed only by building more roads.

Kathleen Harrigan, executive director of Friends of the Rappahannock, said she was glad to hear discussion of transportation alternatives.

“They are really vital for this area,” she said.

State transportation officials will hold additional public hearings on the program early next year.