

Wittman stresses need for more transportation funding, river crossings in Fredericksburg

BY SCOTT SHENK/THE FREE LANCE-STAR | Posted: Friday, March 11, 2016 12:00 am

During a speech at the Fredericksburg Country Club Thursday morning, Rep. Rob Wittman talked about alternatives to getting needed money for regional transportation projects.

He also pointed to the importance of bringing more Rappahannock River crossings to the area to help open the Interstate 95 bottleneck.

Wittman's contention about the need for more river crossings echoed social media comments that Susan Spears, president and CEO of the Fredericksburg Regional Chamber of Commerce, showed and read to several dozen people who gathered for the summit.

The summit was one of several the chamber has held on transportation issues since 2015.

Many of the drivers Spears cited were stuck in Monday afternoon's area-wide traffic jam that happened after a stretch of I-95 was closed while a damaged sign structure was removed.

Spears also repeated a theme commonly echoed by area leaders and transportation officials: All it takes is one incident on the interstate to start a domino effect that locks down people and businesses.

Wittman noted the "frustration" the social media comments showed and said there isn't nearly enough capacity for the amount of traffic that uses the area's roads, especially I-95.

He said the state and region can't wait to fix the problems, but noted the challenge of finding ways to pay for needed projects.

Congress' passage of the long-term federal highway Trust fund bill in December is a step in the right direction, Wittman said. But, he added, only three of the five years of the budget have actual funding.

The congressman said the state needs to find other revenue sources.

One way, he said, is to get more money on every dollar the state sends to the feds, who in turn divvy out money to states and localities for transportation projects. Among other revenue possibilities, he added, is "repatriating" profits that U.S. corporations shelter overseas.

Tying land-use decisions to transportation is something else that should be considered as a way to help quell growing congestion issues in a fast-growing region, Wittman said. This, he said, hasn't been the case in the past.

Locally, Wittman stressed, getting river crossings are a key to opening up traffic flow.

He said getting money for the northbound I-95 crossing project will be a focus for the near future.

A \$115-million southbound crossing project is expected to be approved as part of the state's new prioritization program. The northbound crossing didn't make the cut, but it looks like a good bet to get prioritization money in the second round next year.

The regional chamber's Kasey Nabal said they plan to hold another transportation forum. U.S. Sens. Tim Kaine and Mark Warner are the expected speakers. No date has been set.