

FAMPO endorses state's bids for federal grants

BY SCOTT SHENK/THE FREE LANCE-STAR | Posted: Wednesday, April 20, 2016 12:00 am

Local transportation officials have endorsed the state's bid for millions in federal grants that could help pay for major highway and rail projects in the region.

The Fredericksburg Area Metropolitan Planning Organization's Policy Committee voted unanimously Monday night to support bids by the state and the Virginia Railway Express for some of the \$1.4 billion available from two federal grants.

If won, the grants could go toward the expansion of the Interstate 95 express lanes, the construction of the northbound Rappahannock River Crossing project and rail improvements.

Virginia will compete with numerous other states nationwide for a piece of the grant pie. The results should be known by late summer.

In a presentation Monday night, FAMPO Administrator Paul Agnello said the state hopes to win somewhere in the neighborhood of \$200 million in grants.

Stafford Supervisor Paul Milde, that county's representative on the committee, asked what the odds are of Virginia getting any of the grant money, adding that he'd heard rumors the state was trying to put on a good face on by applying for the funding.

Agnello said there are no guarantees the state will get anything, but noted that he thought the state's proposal was "strong."

"If you don't ask, you don't receive," Agnello added.

The state is grouping the projects the grants would fund as the "Atlantic Gateway," a plan to "unlock" the gridlock from Washington to the Fredericksburg area along the I-95 corridor, according to a recent presentation.

The state's grant proposal targets the expansion of the express lanes north to the Pentagon and south to U.S. 17 in Stafford, the Rappahannock River Crossing and the addition of commuter lots in Stafford and Spotsylvania.

There already are plans to extend the express lanes north on Interstate 395 and about two miles south of what is now a troubled merge with regular I-95 lanes at Garrisonville.

If the express lanes are extended to U.S. 17, that would possibly allow them to tap into the Rappahannock River Crossing, a proposal to add collector-distributor lanes for local traffic along I-95 between U.S. 17 and State Route 3.

The southbound portion of the crossing project is expected to win funding in the state's new prioritization program. The northbound crossing project did not score well, so it isn't expected to get funding in the first round of the new prioritization program.

But if the state gets the grant money, it could help pay for the northbound crossing project and accelerate its construction.

VRE is seeking \$3.6 million to fill a shortfall in funding for improvements at the Leeland Road station in Stafford. That project, which would include the addition of a 650-foot platform, has an estimated price tag of \$11.78 million.