Editorial: Extending express lanes key to 'unlock gridlock'

BY THE EDITORIAL PAGE STAFF OF THE FREE LANCE-STARR | Posted: Tuesday, May 31, 2016 12:00 am

Virginia Transportation officials have moved with uncharacteristic speed to extend the Interstate 95 express lanes merge away from the busy Garrisonville interchange. They should be commended for trying to tame this chokepoint.

Transportation Secretary Aubrey Layne announced May 19 that a Roanoke company will soon start construction of the reversible lanes in the median and link them to the main lanes of I–95 about 2.5 miles south of the current terminus.

The project was put on a fast track following a major outcry from commuters, business leaders, Fredericksburg-area officials and state legislators over morning and afternoon rush-hour backups in Stafford County after the high-occupancy toll lanes opened in December 2014.

Last June, Layne noted that while trip times on the 29-mile express lane corridor through Northern Virginia had improved, the merge in Stafford is a mess. “We didn’t get the southern end right, there’s no doubt about it. That’s got to be fixed,” he told Free Lance–Star transportation reporter Scott Shenk then.

Now, work on the extension will start this summer. The southbound ramp should be completed by late next year and the northbound ramp by the summer of 2018.

Skeptics will say moving the terminus of the express lanes a couple of miles will just move the backups. They may be correct given the massive amount of traffic, commuter and otherwise that I–95 carries every day and especially on summer weekends.

However, a well-engineered merge area with clearly marked lanes away from the weaving local and long-distance traffic at the Aquia–Garrisonville interchange should improve the situation. For example, consider how much better the dreaded Falmouth intersection of U.S. 1, 17 and Butler Road functions since additional lanes were built at that local chokepoint.
Still, this short express lane extension to an area north of the Stafford Courthouse exit is far from a long-term solution.

Years ago, when officials in Stafford County signed on in support of the electronically tolled express lanes, Virginia Department of Transportation officials told them the lanes would end in Spotsylvania County, allowing all area commuters to take advantage of the additional lane capacity.

The terminus changed when VDOT and Transurban, the private builder and operator of the toll project, looked at anticipated revenue figures and weighed them against construction costs. The current express lanes cost $1 billion to build and equip with dynamic toll pricing for vehicles with less than three occupants.

But at this point, there’s no doubt that Transurban is profiting on its investment in the public–private partnership. VDOT and Transurban worked together to design the 2.5-mile extension and merge ramps and will split the expected $50 million cost.

The express lanes will also be extended on Interstate 395 northbound in Arlington. Secretary Lane says, “This project is part of a major effort to unlock gridlock in Northern Virginia.” We certainly hope he’s right.