

Regional leaders join McAuliffe in Fredericksburg to laud transportation grant

BY KRISTIN DAVIS THE FREE LANCE-STAR | Posted: Friday, July 8, 2016 12:45 pm

Area leaders joined Gov. Terry McAuliffe at the Interstate 95 Virginia Welcome Center in Fredericksburg on Friday to herald a series of dramatic transportation improvements designed to alleviate traffic problems that have plagued the region for decades.

McAuliffe called the upgrades to road and rail "a game changer not only for Fredericksburg" but for Virginia and beyond. He stood in view of interstate traffic that had already begun to slow before noon.

Fredericksburg Mayor Mary Katherine Greenlaw, Stafford Supervisor Laura Sellers, Spotsylvania Supervisor Gary Skinner and Fredericksburg Regional Chamber of Commerce President Susan Spears applauded the cooperation and regionalism that will make the improvements a reality.

The governor's press conference came three days after the state announced that a federal grant will put \$165 million into the Atlantic Gateway project, which includes rail expansion, extension of the I-95 express lanes, the Rappahannock River Crossing and increased bus service.

Combined with private investments and public funding, the total cost of the improvements comes to \$1.4 billion.

"We will begin immediately to move ahead," the governor said, with construction set to begin next year. "We are not waiting on this."

Among the upgrades: A new southbound bridge as part of the Rappahannock River Crossing project, which aims to ease congestion by providing local and commuter traffic additional lanes between U.S. 17 and State Route 3.

The funds will also help expand the I-95 express lanes by 17 miles, the governor said to applause. Ten of those miles will be south of the current terminus at Route 610 in North Stafford, which has been fraught with congestion since the electronically tolled lanes opened in December 2014. That should allow the express lanes to tap into the river crossing's collector-distributor lanes that will run parallel to the main lanes.



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Virginia Governor Terry McAuliffe announces highway and rail improvements as part of the Atlantic Gateway project to transform the I-95 corridor in the Fredericksburg region during a press conference at the Virginia Welcome Center along I-95 in Fredericksburg on Friday, July 8, 2016.

Fourteen miles of new tracks in Northern Virginia and an expanded long bridge over the Potomac River will relieve the bottleneck for Amtrak and Virginia Railway Express trains that have to give way to freight train traffic, McAuliffe said.

The ultimate goal, the governor said, is to improve the quality of life for Virginians and make the commonwealth an attractive place for businesses seeking to open and expand. That is not possible "if you are stuck in traffic all day and it takes you two hours to go see your kids' ballgame."

The Atlantic Gateway will "open up every community" in the commonwealth, McAuliffe said.

Local leaders lamented the region's bottleneck and lauded the coming changes.

"Every facet of our lives is scheduled around traffic," said Greenlaw, the city's mayor.

Sellers told how Stafford communities have felt the impact of I-95 drivers seeking relief on back roads. They "drive through our neighborhoods and speed through our neighborhoods," she said.

"It is a crisis in our region. We have suffered this crisis for years," Spears said.

But relief is coming.

Reporter Scott Shenk contributed to this story.