

FAMPO pans high-speed rail bypass option through Fredericksburg

By SCOTT SHENK THE FREE LANCE-STAR | Posted: Monday, July 18, 2016 10:04 pm

An eastern bypass option for a proposed high-speed rail line took another beating Monday, a week after more than 200 residents railed against it at a public meeting in Spotsylvania County.

A group of about 20 residents showed up to oppose the bypass at the Fredericksburg Area Metropolitan Planning Organization Policy Committee's monthly meeting Monday night.

A dozen residents spoke out against the bypass, saying the option would leave them in limbo for years wondering whether a new rail would come through some of their properties.

The committee then held a lengthy discussion on the issue.

Then, although the bypass wasn't up for a vote on the agenda, Spotsylvania Supervisor Greg Benton moved for FAMPO to vote in opposition to the option, one of three being studied by the Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation as part of a proposed 123-mile Richmond-to-Washington segment of the Southeast High Speed Rail line project.

A secondary motion was made to delay such a vote until the next meeting, but it failed, 5-4.

The committee then passed Benton's motion, 5-4. The vote doesn't kill the project; the Commonwealth Transportation Board could also weigh in and Federal Rail Administration has the final say.

Fredericksburg Councilman Matt Kelly and Stafford Supervisor Paul Milde adamantly opposed the motion, saying there wasn't enough information to make a decision or warn other area residents who might have issues with the other options.

"The worst decision in my entire career as an elected official," Kelly said during a short break after the vote.

Along with Benton, Spotsylvania Supervisors David Ross and Tim McLaughlin and Stafford supervisors Meg Bohmke and Laura Sellers voted to oppose the bypass.

McLaughlin was critical of the potential cost of the overall project, which would be in the billions.

He also complained that the project would benefit CSX Transportation and other private companies on the taxpayers' dime.

He also criticized the \$49 million price tag for the environmental impact study DRPT is conducting. That study includes the three options for the third track.

Fredericksburg Councilman Billy Withers and Mark Whitley, the assistant city manager, joined Milde and Kelly in voting against the motion.

The two-track bypass would run from just south of the new Virginia Railway Express station in Spotsylvania, loop around just inside Caroline County and then run next to the existing track parallel to

State Route 3 into southern Stafford, through the Ferry Farm area.

A new bridge would have to be built over the Rappahannock River for this option, and there would be new road crossings. Those likely would be overpasses, with the tracks running beneath them.

Another option for the high-speed rail is to build the third track alongside the existing tracks in CSX Transportation's right-of-way, which would bring the new line through Fredericksburg's train station.

The third option is to not add a third track. Instead, there would be improvements made to crossings, signals and safety systems in the Fredericksburg area, including the downtown train station.

According to estimates, the proposed high-speed rail line would add nine daily round trips to train traffic through the area and shorten those trips between Richmond and Washington by 15 to 20 minutes.

Although there is no specific timeline for completing the proposed line, the tentative build-out date is 2026. It could be done in phases.

The project will have to get funding and the approval of the Federal Rail Administration before work can be done.

Hap Connors, the area's CTB member, said he's heard talk of the high-speed rail line for more than a decade and doubts it will ever get done.

The DRPT plans to have a draft of the preferred alternatives ready in the fall, then public hearings will be held so people can see the plans and respond to them.

A final decision is expected to be made in late 2017.