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I-95 express lanes extension deal will also fund northbound Rappahannock River Crossing

BY SCOTT SHENK THE FREE LANCE-STAR Jan 10, 2018



A two-mile extension of the I-95 Express Lane in Stafford opened in October. A new deal will not only extend the lanes to U.S. 17 in southern Stafford, but provide money up front to fund the northbound Rappahannock River Crossing project.

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The state announced a transportation deal Wednesday that could kill two birds with one stone.

The agreement with Australia-based Transurban will result in the construction of the proposed 10-mile Interstate 95 express lanes extension in Stafford County as well as an influx of money to pay for the northbound Rappahannock River crossing, a major project that has been stuck in limbo.

Virginia Gov. Terry McAuliffe announced the deal at the Commonwealth Transportation Board's meeting in Richmond Wednesday morning, saying the agreement is another in a string of projects aimed at improving transportation in the state.

The governor also pointed out that the agreement is different than the one the previous administration struck with Transurban to help fund, build and operate the express lanes from Stafford to Northern Virginia. In that deal, Transurban will reap the toll revenue for more than 70 years before the state can get a cut of the profits.

Transurban will pay for the express lanes extension, which has an estimated price tag of \$450 million, and the state will get money up front for estimated toll revenue.

"This deal will not require any upfront taxpayer investment for construction," McAuliffe's said in a release, "and will provide \$277 million by the time the express lanes are open that will be invested in the corridor to advance critical transportation projects."

State Secretary of Transportation Aubrey Layne said during the meeting that the \$277 million Transurban will pay the state is an estimate of future toll revenue from the extended toll lanes.

A portion of that money will help pay for the construction of the northbound crossing project, which will add collector–distributor lanes along the primary interstate lanes.

The estimated \$135 million northbound crossing project had failed to garner funding in the state's first two rounds of Smart Scale, a scoring program aimed at paying for the most important transportation projects. And the future of the project remained in doubt before Wednesday's announcement.

Work is set to start this summer on the \$125 million crossing project for the southbound side of the interstate. The CTB approved a contractor on Wednesday to build the southbound crossing.

There will be money remaining from the \$277 million that can be spent on other projects in the corridor.

The express lanes extension is another project aimed at fixing congestion problems at the merge area around State Route 610 since the toll lanes opened in December 2014.

The problems prompted the state and Transurban to build a \$50 million extension to a new merge point in Stafford's Courthouse Road area. New ramps on that first extension opened in October.

Transurban will pay for and build the longer, two-lane reversible extension from the new merge area to U.S. 17. The new toll lanes will tap into the additional lanes that will be added as part of the southbound Rappahannock River crossing project.

The express lanes extension project also will include flyover ramps at the merge area at U.S. 17 and in the Quantico area, along with a ramp at Courthouse Road. There also will be seven new bridges built as part of the extension, which will include replacing the Truslow Road and American Legion overpasses.

During the CTB meeting, outgoing Virginia Department of Transportation Administrator Charlie Kilpatrick, a Spotsylvania resident, said the agreement should fix the interstate bottleneck problem he first started working on as an engineer with the Fredericksburg office in 1994.

Traffic on the interstate through the Fredericksburg region has grown exponentially since the mid-90s, with a stretch of I-95 in Stafford being tabbed as the worst choke point in the nation last year.

The agreement, Kilpatrick said, could improve gridlock “from the Pentagon to Route 3 in Fredericksburg,” a thought that “four years ago was dead in the water.”

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http://www.fredericksburg.com/opinion/editorials/editorial-northbound-rappahannock-river-crossing-is-a-go/article_5d075fbf-3614-5bea-b740-26139e730867.html

EDITORIAL: Northbound Rappahannock River Crossing is a go!

12 hrs ago

ONE OF Terry McAuliffe's final acts as governor of Virginia was his surprise announcement that the left-for-dead Northbound Rappahannock River Crossing project would be built as well as its companion southbound project.

And what a surprise it was! McAuliffe dropped this bombshell at the Commonwealth Transportation Board's meeting in Richmond last week. It's an understatement to say that this was one of most welcome pieces of news for the Fredericksburg region that has come out of Richmond in quite a while.

As the Free Lance-Star has repeatedly pointed out, expanding just the southbound section of Interstate 95 across the river never made any sense given both spans' current congestion levels. But the Virginia Department of Transportation insisted that there was not enough money to do both.

However, where there's a will there's a way - and to their credit McAuliffe, former Transportation Secretary Aubrey Lane, and CTB representative Hap Connors found the way. The deal they crafted uses projected toll revenue from the proposed 10-mile Express Lane extension to pay for the northbound crossing project, which had all but been abandoned by local officials who despaired of ever getting the needed funding.

Transurban, the Australian company that has partnered with the commonwealth to build high occupancy toll lanes (HOT) along I-95 and the Capital Beltway in Northern Virginia, agreed to finance the northbound crossing upfront to the tune of \$277 million. In exchange, the company will keep all of the tolls it collects from the Express Lane extension over the next 70 years instead of sharing the toll money with VDOT, as it does with its other HOT lane projects.

With work set to begin this summer on construction of the \$125 million southbound crossing project, and with funding for the \$132 million northbound crossing now secured, beleaguered Fredericksburg commuters can expect some future relief, although it will be several years down the road before both projects are completed.

Nevertheless, funding the northbound crossing is progress, and progress is something to celebrate.

Fredericksburg Area Metropolitan Planning Organization administrator Paul Agnello called the deal "a tremendous development," noting that the northbound crossing is FAMPO's top regional priority. "This will make a huge difference in the lives of many Virginians" as well as the "hundreds of thousands of people who travel on I-95 from Florida to Maine," he told the Free Lance-Star.

Agnello also pointed out that due to the unconventional financing arrangement, the northbound crossing project will be completed much sooner than if it had been approved earlier. FAMPO can also take it off the list of must-do projects and direct its limited local funding and application slots towards another critical transportation project instead.

It's a great irony that McAuliffe's triumph in securing funding for the Northbound Rappahannock River Crossing had to be done outside the Smart Scale system he inaugurated in 2014. Smart Scale - which was designed to take politics out of transportation funding - theoretically uses objective metrics to determine the best use of limited transportation funds.

However, despite the obvious need, the northbound crossing project didn't make Smart Scale's cut two times in a row. Convinced that it was futile to submit a third application, local supporters were seriously considering withdrawing the project altogether in favor of smaller upgrades they believed had a better chance.

If Smart Scale was working properly in practice, it would have prioritized both Rappahannock River crossings as the commonwealth's top transportation priorities due to I-95's high level of congestion and its strategic importance as the main arterial on the East Coast.

The fact that McAuliffe had to do an end-run around his own system to get the northbound crossing done is proof that Smart Scale has serious flaws, including an inexplicable decision not to include heavy weekend traffic in its scoring metrics. Those flaws need to be addressed.

But that should not stop every driver in the Fredericksburg region from relishing some great transportation news for a change.

RELEASE: IMMEDIATE

GOV

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Governor McAuliffe Announces Deal to Deliver 95 Express Lanes Extension and Provide \$277M for Additional Upgrades to the 95 Corridor
Deal will also fund the Northbound Rappahannock River Crossing

RICHMOND – Governor Terry McAuliffe today announced that the commonwealth has accepted Transurban’s proposal to deliver the extension of the 95 Express Lanes south to Fredericksburg.

“When I took office four years ago, I made a commitment to radically change how we do transportation in Virginia,” said Governor McAuliffe. “Virginians spent \$300 million on the U.S. Route 460 project that was never built, because state officials negotiated a poor contract. Today, I am pleased to announce the Commonwealth has accepted a proposal from Transurban to build the 95 Express Lanes extension 10 miles south of Route 17 in Fredericksburg. This deal will not require any upfront taxpayer investment for construction, and will provide \$277 million by the time the express lanes are open that will be invested in the corridor to advance critical transportation projects.”

This project is a part of the Atlantic Gateway initiative to improve travel along the 95 Corridor. With this announcement, the initiative has been expanded to include the Northbound Rappahannock River Crossing, which is a major priority of the Fredericksburg region. In 2022, the 95 corridor from the Potomac River to Fredericksburg will be upgraded. The initiative was made possible through partnerships with the private sector and a grant from the federal government.

“This project addresses an area that traffic data company, INRIX, named ‘worst traffic hot spot’ in the nation,” said Secretary of Transportation Aubrey Layne. “Expanding the Express Lanes 10 miles south will bring much-needed relief from the existing bottlenecks along the I-95 corridor, improve reliability for commuters and freight, enhance road safety and set up the regional economy for future growth.”

The 95 Express Lanes, together with the 395 Express Lanes will provide travel choices and reliable, uninterrupted travel for 50 miles in one of the most congested corridors in the nation. They will also link into the larger regional network of Express Lanes in Northern Virginia on the 495 and 66 corridors.

“Transurban is pleased to continue its long-term partnership with the department to bring congestion relief and extend travel options to the growing Fredericksburg region,” said Jennifer Aument, President, North America, Transurban. “The project, together with the 395 Express Lanes, will provide reliable, uninterrupted travel for 50 miles in one of the most congested corridors in the nation.”

Construction is expected to begin in the Spring of 2019 with the facility slated to open in fall 2022.

The following are key features of the project:

- Ten miles of new two-lane reversible Express Lanes (with full shoulders) from the existing southern terminus at Route 610 to Route 17 North (Exit 143 to Exit 133) and approximately 1.5 miles of an additional reversible Express Lane within the existing 95 Express Lanes south of Garrisonville Road (Route 610)
- New Express Lanes access points, including flyover ramps at the Route 17 terminus and Quantico area and a direct, reversible ramp connection at (Old) Courthouse Road
- Seven new bridge structures:
 - o Express Lanes mainline across Potomac Creek

- o Northbound general purpose (GP) lanes flyover entrance to Express Lanes north of Route 17
- o Northbound Express Lanes flyover exit to GP lanes and Russell Road
- o Southbound GP lanes flyover entrance to Express Lanes south of Russell Road
- o Southbound Express Lanes flyover to GP lanes and Route 17 at Southern Terminus
- o American Legion Road overpass (demolish and rebuild existing structure)
- o Truslow Road overpass (demolish and rebuild existing structure)
- Interface and direct connection with the Virginia Department of Transportation's Rappahannock River Crossing – Southbound Project, including a new general-purpose lane exit ramp at Route 17
- All-electronic tolling with same rules as 95 Express Lanes

For more information, visit http://www.virginiadot.org/projects/fredericksburg/i-95_express_lanes_fredericksburg_extension.asp.

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