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Stafford parking increase possible

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The region is looking at new ways to expand commuter parking in North Stafford, after piles of snow last week caused overflow conditions that led some drivers to leave vehicles at a shopping center, where their vehicles were towed.

Last night, an agenda item for the Fredericksburg Area Metropolitan Planning Organization meeting summed up the mood: "Route 610 Parking Crisis."

"It's a high level of frustration in the area where I live," said Stafford supervisor Mark Dudenhefer.

While some communities have to entice residents to leave their cars behind, Stafford has been overly successful at attracting carpoolers and transit riders.

Two Virginia Department of Transportation parking lots with a combined 1,758 spaces near Garrisonville Road are 130 percent full every day of the week, meaning all legal spaces are taken, and many drivers create illegal spaces on the lot's margins.

One of the lots, on Staffordboro Boulevard, has 1,008 spaces. A local ridesharing program, GW RideConnect, counted all the known buses, carpools and vanpools that meet at the lot, and came up with a number of required spaces: 1,008.

"That does not include the massive slug line that operates out of that lot every day," said Diana Utz, GWRideConnect director.

Parking spaces exist at a few commuter lots elsewhere in the Fredericksburg region, but people flock to the North Stafford lots because a unique form of commuting--slugging--is robust there. "Slugs" are commuters who line up to form instant carpools of three people to work destinations, making the vehicles eligible to use High Occupancy Vehicle lanes. Many commuters park at the North Stafford lots because their chances of getting a ride--or finding slugs--is greatest there.

Construction of High Occupancy Toll lanes on Interstate 95/395 was supposed to provide funds to build at least 1,050 new commuter parking spaces on Garrisonville Road through a public-private deal with Virginia.

But the project is on hold, and so is the funding.

Last night, FAMPO board members saw a consultant's report on where space is available.

The best location is on Staffordboro Boulevard, on a parcel of land to the north of the existing lot. It is owned by the Stafford County School Board, and if converted to parking, could add another 850 spaces, according to a report by Vanasse Hangen Brustlin Inc.

Adding two land parcels of right-of-way Stafford County had set aside for road expansions, but which county staff say is no longer needed, would add room for another 210 spaces on Staffordboro, bringing the total to 1,060 potential parking spaces there.

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Acquiring the land and building the spaces would cost around \$5.5 million, which is slightly more than \$5,000 per parking space.

Dudenhefer said he's exploring all options.

One low-cost alternative is being put into place now. Stafford is adding bike racks so commuters who live nearby can pedal to the lot in warmer weather.

Dudenhefer said he devoted years to planning parking through the HOT lanes project, but since that initiative is delayed, he cannot wait any longer. Stafford will look to bring the commuter parking project back to FAMPO's board as a project eligible for federal transportation funds, he said, where it will be considered along with other regional projects.

Dudenhefer estimated at least one-third of all parking lot users are from outside Stafford County.

Utz confirmed many residents have to drive a distance to find a ride leaving at the appropriate time, headed to their workplace. "At times they have to go to [State Route] 610 just to find a ride, just so you can rideshare," Utz said.

The commuter parking issue has been ongoing for years, but took on new urgency last week after large snow piles subtracted from the number of available spaces in the lots.

The overflow cars moved to a neighboring shopping center, Stafford Marketplace, where commuter parking is not permitted, as drivers are warned on posted signs.

On Wednesday, Feb. 17, Shanks Towing removed 28 vehicles from the Stafford Marketplace parking lot, said Maj. David Decatur of the Stafford County Sheriff's Office.

Shanks Towing co-owner Mike Shanks said his company removed the cars at the request of a contractor for Pence-Friedel, which manages a small section of the shopping center where the Best Buy is located.

"There wasn't a parking space available for customers coming in," Shanks said, adding that commuters had not only filled up all the spaces outside the store, several had parked improperly across multiple spaces.

Shanks said it was the first time his company had been asked to tow vehicles from Stafford Marketplace.

Video surveillance of the parking area was reviewed to ensure vehicles that were towed were left behind by commuters who parked and then walked across the street, Shanks said.

He thinks the situation could have been avoided if snow was removed from the commuter lot.

"It's a tough thing getting towed, but imagine being a manager at Best Buy and not having a place for your customers to park, and not just your customers, but your employees," Shanks said.

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