



Print this Page

[Return to story](#)

City, Spotsy start toll road process

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By KELLY HANNON

The first public hearing will be held this week on a proposal that, if implemented, could let Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania County charge drivers a toll to use a new State Route 3 bypass.

The public hearings--two in Fredericksburg and two in Spotsylvania--are required by a 2009 law passed by the Virginia General Assembly creating the option for a George Washington Toll Road Authority.

The hearings are the public's opportunity to weigh in on the establishment of the authority, which would be the first of its kind in the Fredericksburg area.

The first hearing will be held at tomorrow's Fredericksburg City Council meeting, which begins at 7:30 p.m. in council chambers. A presentation on the toll-road authority will precede the public hearing.

A second public hearing in Fredericksburg has not been yet scheduled.

Public hearing dates in Spotsylvania are to be discussed at tomorrow's Board of Supervisors meeting. Two potential dates proposed by county staff are April 13 and May 11.

The George Washington Toll Road Authority would be limited to building new highways in the Route 3 corridor. It could enter into public-private partnerships and set toll rates.

Toll-road authorities already exist in other parts of Virginia. The Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority sets toll rates for the Dulles Toll Road, and the Richmond Metropolitan Authority sets tolls for the Powhite Parkway and Downtown Expressway.

If the George Washington Toll Road Authority moves ahead, it would have seven members. Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania would each be represented by three elected officials--City Council members and county supervisors--plus the Virginia Department of Transportation commissioner or his designee. Board members would serve three-year terms, except for the VDOT commissioner.

If the authority wanted to set toll rates above \$1, a full vote of the City Council and Board of Supervisors would be required.

The authority's first project is likely to be a new Interstate 95 interchange near the Virginia Welcome Center and a Route 3 bypass from I-95 west to Gordon Road.

The Fredericksburg Area Metropolitan Planning Organization has been working on a \$400,000 feasibility study of that project since late 2007, sharing the study cost with VDOT and the Celebrate Virginia Community Development Authority. The group is preparing to submit documents to the Federal Highway Administration for initial approval.

The new interchange and bypass, plus improvements to Interstate 95, U.S. 17 and the Rappahannock River bridge, are expected to cost about \$250 million.

If it were free, about 65,000 cars a day would take a Route 3 bypass from I-95 to Gordon Road, according to early traffic modeling by FAMPO.

If drivers had to pay a \$1 toll, the use could drop to 30,000 to 35,000 cars.

About 76,000 vehicles a day now travel Route 3 between Salem Church Road and Fredericksburg, according to VDOT.

A recent letter from Virginia Secretary of Transportation Sean Connaughton indicated public money to build the project may be hard to find.

"Regrettably, federal and state funding for I-95 improvements in the near future is doubtful," Connaughton wrote in a letter to FAMPO. "Once all parties agree on a preferred alternative for the toll road, VDOT will work with the region to accomplish the project."

Fredericksburg Mayor Tom Tomzak and Gary Skinner, chairman of the Spotsylvania Board of Supervisors, recently sent letters to Virginia's U.S. senators, Mark Warner and Jim Webb, asking for \$5 million to spend on project design and environmental work.

"While tolls collected in association with a new parkway to be built between Celebrate Virginia South and Virginia Route 3 will provide substantial funding for the project, some public funding will also be required for improvements to I-95 adding capacity at the U.S. 17 Interchange, adding additional mainline capacity and providing more lanes across the Rappahannock River," the letters said.

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