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ROAD PROJECT REVIVED

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More than 10 years after the Outer Connector was abandoned, Stafford County supervisors took a step toward reviving part of a beltway around Fredericksburg.

The Board of Supervisors didn't vote at yesterday's meeting, but directed county staff to look into construction of a highway that would link the Centreport interchange on Interstate 95 with U.S. 17 near Stafford Lakes Parkway.

Supervisors are limiting their discussion to the portion that could wind southwestward from I-95 and the Stafford Regional Airport to U.S. 17. The project--now referred to as the Stafford Parkway--was once called the Berea Parkway.

Having the highway crossing the Rappahannock River into Spotsylvania County is not on the agenda at this point, but it was not ruled out.

"The reality is that we're already behind the eight-ball," Supervisor Gary Snellings said of the traffic situation on U.S. 17. He said a more extensive solution may be necessary, "maybe a beltway."

Whatever the solution turns out to be, Snellings said that he will "support it wholeheartedly."

Supervisor Mark Dudenhefer wants to find out if Stafford County could join the George Washington Toll Road Authority. Spotsylvania and the city of Fredericksburg already belong to the authority, which is limited to projects in the State Route 3 corridor.

Dudenhefer wants to find out if their jurisdiction can be expanded into southern Stafford.

"I propose we establish a liaison with them," Dudenhefer said. "We need to engage with staff in coming up with an action plan."

From roughly 1997 to 1999, the long-discussed Outer Connector was close to becoming a reality. In theory, the road would have served as a sort of "belt-way" around Fredericksburg, looping west of the city through the Chancellor area of Spotsylvania. Most suggested routes had the road terminating at I-95 in central Stafford and the Massaponax area of Spotsylvania.

A number of public meetings were held in Stafford, Spotsylvania and Fredericksburg during that time.

Vocal residents were divided on the Outer Connector proposal. The idea eventually hit too many snags with environmental experts, historians and concerned citizens who questioned the value of the project and the potential negative impact of building a new bridge over the Rappahannock River.

The Outer Connector was designed to relieve heavy traffic on both State Route 3 and U.S. 17. Congestion has only increased over the past 10 years, and local officials are still looking for a way to take vehicles--especially heavy trucks--off those important local arteries.

"If the Outer Connector had been approved," Dudenhefer said, "we'd be well on our way to construction by now."

Some disconnected portions of the Outer Connector are already built. The Spotsylvania Parkway roughly follows the planned route of the southwest portion of the connector from State Route 208 to U.S. 1 in Massaponax. And the U.S. 17 Bypass from New Post to U.S. 1 at Cosner's Corner was built decades ago.

If the Stafford Parkway is built, it would cover the northwest portion of the Outer Connector, leaving the most complicated section of the "beltway" as a future consideration. The stretch between U.S. 17 in Stafford and State Route 3 and on to State Route 208 in Spotsylvania would require tricky maneuvering through environmentally sensitive areas, Civil War battlefields, dense development and, of course, a bridge over the scenic Rappahannock.

Equally tricky is paying for the project in the absence of state and local funds. Dudenhefer hopes a private business would be interested in building and operating the road as a for-profit endeavor. He warned that any progress will be slow and it could take at least a year for Stafford to be included in the toll authority, if it happens at all.

Supervisors yesterday asked county planners to report back at the Sept. 21 meeting. "I'm asking staff to come up with what we need to do," Dudenhefer said.

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