

County closer to HOT lanes

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Elected officials in Prince William County are looking more closely at plans for pay-to-cruise interstate lanes and they have some commuter-friendly suggestions of their own.

High-Occupancy Toll lanes, or HOT lanes, should be seriously considered, said members of the Board of County Supervisors on Tuesday after they heard a presentation by Gary Groat, director of project development for Fluor Virginia.

Fluor Virginia, an Arlington-based transportation company, has submitted a public-private partnership bid to build 56 miles of HOT lanes from 14th Street in Washington, D.C., to the Massaponax interchange in Spotsylvania County.

"We really have to examine these proposals because there is no federal or state funding for it," said Supervisor Chairman Sean T. Connaughton, R-at large. "This may be our only hope for road and transit improvements in this corridor."

Fluor's \$1 billion proposal would add a third lane to the reversible High-Occupancy Vehicle lanes that exist between the north- and south-bound lanes of Interstate 95.

Instead of requiring two passengers, the new lanes would require three or more passengers per vehicle to avoid a toll charge.

Groat said that in California, where HOT lane popularity is growing, more people are car-pooling to use the HOT lanes without having to pay.

Fluor's design also calls for an additional 24 exit and entrance ramps with some for buses only.

The design, Groat said, encourages bus transit systems.

The Bus Rapid Transit system that is being encouraged with the plan would access existing and undeserved transit areas.

Supervisor Maureen S. Caddigan, R-Dumfries, suggested that more park and ride lots be built in Prince William to take advantage of the HOT lanes.

"It looks like there is a light at the end of the tunnel," Caddigan said about the proposal.

VDOT doesn't have plans to extend the existing HOV lanes for years.

Groat said that if environmental impact studies are done within 18 months, construction could begin by 2006.

But the Commonwealth Transportation Board has to first decide if it wants HOT lanes, then who should build them.

Fluor Virginia has made one of two proposals submitted to the Virginia Department of Transportation.

Clark/SCC/KPRI made the other proposal and is scheduled to present it to Prince William officials later this year.

The Board will send a letter to the Commonwealth Transportation Board to encourage it to choose HOT lanes and make it speedy.

The Bus Rapid Transit could even be used on U.S. 1, Connaughton suggested.

Instead of calling HOT lanes "Lexus Lanes" as critics sometimes refer to them, Groat suggested a new name.

They're not ways for only the wealthy to bypass traffic jams on the general lanes, he said.

"They should call them "Lumina Lanes," he said, since studies have shown that in California people from all social and economic strata use the HOT lanes.

Single-passenger cars could pay up to \$7 dollars or more to drive on them.

Tolls are calculated per mile and the average toll could be about 15 cents per mile, Groat said.

The tolls could change every six minutes and go up or down depending on congestion. If lanes are relatively clear, the charge is low. If they get congested, the rate increases, just like peak phone rates or electricity use times.

Highway managers would be able to keep an eye on the lanes by monitoring about 150 cameras watching the entire stretch of road from Spotsylvania to the District.

Only cars with Smart Tag or EZPass stickers could use the toll lanes because cash won't be accepted. High occupancy vehicles would also use a sticker to indicate that they shouldn't be charged.

Also in the works is a Fluor proposal for a \$693 million expansion of the Beltway HOV lanes between the Springfield Interchange and the American Legion Bridge.