

Va. Gets \$1 Billion Toll Lane Proposal

State Comparing Plans for I-95, I-395

By Lisa Rein

Washington Post Staff Writer

Wednesday, March 17, 2004; Page B01

A private company submitted a proposal to Virginia yesterday to build and operate toll lanes along the interstate between Washington and Massaponax, 56 miles south, in what would be the most extensive network of its kind in the region.

The \$1 billion plan from engineering firm Fluor Virginia would allow solo drivers or two-person vehicles to buy their way out of traffic. Additionally, if the state approves another toll-lane plan that a sister company, Fluor-Daniel, has pending for the Capital Beltway, motorists could drive toll lanes 70 miles from Georgetown Pike along the Beltway to a point on Interstate 95 south of Fredericksburg.

The pay-as-you-drive-faster concept for Shirley Highway and I-95, two of the region's most congested routes, underscores the traction that high-occupancy toll, or HOT, lanes, have gained as a salve for gridlock. Fluor's proposal to the Virginia Department of Transportation will be in direct competition with a similar, less ambitious plan for I-95 conceived last fall by Clark/SCC/KPRI. The state transportation agency, which encourages such public-private partnerships under a nine-year-old law, will evaluate both plans over several months.

"We encourage and promote competition," Pierce R. Homer, Virginia's deputy transportation secretary, said yesterday. "There's a long road to go in terms of process."

Both ventures envision converting the reversible carpool lanes along I-95 to reversible HOT lanes using shoulders along the existing right of way. The lanes would head north during the morning rush hour and south for the afternoon commute.

Drivers would pay tolls electronically, and charges would vary with the time of day and degree of traffic congestion. On average, tolls would cost 15 cents a mile under the Fluor plan, company officials said. The lanes would remain free to carpools with three or more people, to van pools and to buses. Both plans would allow motorists to drive directly to the Beltway on the HOT lanes.

The Clark group would convert carpool lanes to HOT lanes south of the Springfield interchange and extend them 36 miles nearly to Fredericksburg. Fluor, meanwhile, would start its lanes at the 14th Street Bridge where it leaves the District and stop them south of the Rappahannock River. The existing carpool lanes on Shirley Highway and I-95 stretch 28 miles from Washington to just south of Dumfries.

Fluor is calling its proposal a Bus Rapid Transit/HOT Lanes System, touting the long-term potential for HOT lanes to improve transit. The idea is to create a seamless web for express bus service. Buses would share the road with other traffic on the HOT lanes, but passengers would get on and off at stations off the highway.

Fluor also envisions adding several park-and-ride lots for passengers and carpoolers. Buses would use designated on and off ramps.

Any approved project would be financed through bonds, which would be paid off with toll revenues. But Fluor is also proposing that \$5 million in annual toll revenue be dedicated to expanded bus service.

Although VDOT will have the final say, local governments from Alexandria to Spotsylvania County are likely to review the HOT lane proposals. Fairfax endorsed the concept late last year.

Fairfax Supervisor T. Dana Kauffman (D-Lee) whose district includes a stretch of I-95, said the longer the span of the tolls lanes, the more appealing the plan will be to drivers and bus riders.

"As long as transit is an integral part of the . . . project, it could be a great boon," he said. "I hope it is designed to ensure that buses can seamlessly use the system."

If the state approves the Beltway proposal submitted last year, VDOT would team up with Fluor-Daniel to build two HOT lanes in each direction, stretching for 14 miles west of the Springfield interchange to the Tysons Corner area, ending just south of Georgetown Pike.

"We talked to every county and city up and down the corridor, and they said, 'You need to bring the lanes inside the Beltway because you're a captive once you're inside the Beltway,'" said Gary Groat, a spokesman for Fluor.

Organizers of the Clark project, estimated to cost between \$400 million and \$500 million, said they welcome the competition from Fluor. They said their proposal did not include HOT lanes inside the Beltway because the 14th Street Bridge has relatively narrow shoulders.

"We hail the competition and think it's healthy for the industry," said James W. Atwell, a consultant for the Clark group. He would not disclose the average cost of tolls in the company's proposal, saying the information was confidential.

The Sierra Club has opposed the plan for Beltway HOT lanes on the grounds that the highway would be widened, attracting more vehicles to an already congested road. "When you add new lanes, you get new traffic," said Roger Diedrich, chairman of the group's Virginia chapter. He said he is reserving judgment on the I-95 proposals until after he has studied them.

The competition to allow motorists to bypass congestion for a fee reflects the concept's growing support among elected leaders who have been unable to find significant solutions to traffic congestion. In some places, HOT lanes have been called "Lexus lanes"

-- implying that they allow wealthy drivers more options than drivers of more modest means.

Maryland's studies of HOT lanes were suspended by then-Gov. Parris N. Glendening (D), who cited class issues. But the administration of Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. (R) has again focused attention on them and is looking at HOT lanes as part of several highway projects, including the proposed intercounty connector, officials said.

Staff writer Tim Craig contributed to this report.