

Big Changes Proposed to Help I-95 Traffic

Summary of Article by Max Smith, WTOP news

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A series of recommendations are being proposed as part of a wholesale look at the I-95 corridor between the Virginia/North Carolina border and Washington, DC. This study, conducted by the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT), is part of a \$1.7 billion proposal for several improvements to upgrade roadways and transit services along the corridor.

Roadway proposals include potentially adding bi-directional lanes along the shoulders on the existing I-95 express lanes, which helps with adding roadway capacity by utilizing existing infrastructure. Longer-term studies identified extending the Beltway toll lanes and even exploring the potential for creating other bi-directional lanes along the I-95 express lanes. Most of these proposals will not move forward until a separate study on the I-64 corridor is completed later this year.

The plan also identifies \$375 million for 26 bus, rail, and park and ride projects. The idea is to propose a series of multi-modal improvements, as many are much cheaper than building additional lanes for capacity, representing a significant cost savings in terms of potential performance benefits. The state projects more than 7,700 more people could cross the Occoquan with transit improvements, which also includes increased slugging, transit, and carpooling opportunities. Without the addition of transit improvements, additional roadway miles would only temporarily solve the problem and would eventually return to the current state of traffic congestion. VDOT also plans to improve coordination with Fort Belvoir on potential shuttles or bus routes to move a larger proportion of the traffic that travels over the Occoquan to the base.

Rail improvements include longer trains for Virginia Railway Express (VRE) and expanded parking lots, which are expected to dramatically improve VRE and Amtrak service over the next decade.

Other proposals include studying how to improve traffic along detour routes such as Route 1 and Route 301 that motorists often use to bypass I-95 when traffic is at its heaviest. This includes improved signage and lane markings and improve variable messaging showing travel times using one route versus the other.

So What? How Do These Proposals Impact OMNIRIDE and How Will OMNIRIDE Benefit From These Improvements?

OmniRide has a significant amount of commuter service operating along the I-95 corridor. More than 60 percent of total commuter services operate on a daily basis between Stafford County and eastern Prince William County to the Pentagon, Washington, DC and parts of Arlington, VA. The challenge is that while using the express lanes provides a significant time benefit, the deadhead, or non-revenue trip, is completed by using the general purpose lanes of I-95. This often is much slower due to heavier traffic and the lack of transit priority.

The afternoon rush hour is the most problematic operationally due to sharing roadway capacity not only with local traffic, but the entire eastern seaboard as well. Often times, in the spring and summer, it is not unheard of for the non-revenue trip from Woodbridge to Washington, DC to be more than double the time that it takes to travel back to eastern Prince William County in the express lanes. This leads to the complexity, and sometimes reliability issues, that challenge commuter operations when operating in a heavily congested environment.

Thanks to additional state funding, OmniRide has been able to focus on projects that increase the frequency of services and provide transit alternatives to assist in reducing congestion. These include two (2) new commuter routes from Stafford County to the Pentagon and Washington, DC, which started in November 2019, additional peak frequency on both the Prince William Metro Express and Route 1 Local routes, and additional trips on commuter services from Dale City to the Rosslyn-Ballston corridor in Arlington, VA. Past initiatives have provided funding to expand commuter services to Mark Center and Tyson's Corner from eastern Prince William County.

A recent tour of commuter lots along the I-95 corridor revealed there are some low cost changes that could be made to potentially improve operations by streamlining the way OmniRide operates services through the Horner Road commuter lot such as consolidating stops to minimize dwell times while loading passengers in the morning and possibly reconfiguring parking spaces to increase the parking capacity. At the Telegraph Road commuter lot, working with VDOT to identify ways to improve the flow of traffic could also yield time-saving benefits.

The soon-to-be-built Neabsco District parking garage, near Stonebridge, will also provide much needed capacity and allow OmniRide to restructure its commuter and local operations to provide more direct services making commuting even more attractive and available.

OmniRide looks forward to working with VDOT and its other state and local partners to solve the commuting issues along the corridor. As other funding opportunities become available, OmniRide will be aggressive in seeking these funds to provide more enhanced or expanded operations to further the growth of the system in a smart, efficient manner.