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Richmond Times-Dispatch

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Officials willing to redesign U.S. 460 toll project

By Michael Martz

Virginia transportation officials say changes to the design of the U.S. 460 toll road are "probable" in Prince George County, which has conditioned its support for the project on a new alignment of the proposed expressway's western terminus.

Program manager Morteza Farajian told representatives of local governments from the Tri-Cities region that work will not begin for two years on the ends of the \$1.4 billion private-public highway project to allow time to change the design in both Prince George and Suffolk.

"We think that change to the western terminus is something probable," Farajian said during a 90-minute briefing at the Crater Regional Planning District Commission in Petersburg.

The announcement elated Prince George officials who attended the briefing. "That's the best news that Prince George could have heard today," County Administrator Percy C. Ashcraft said after the meeting.

State officials also assured local and regional officials, including a representative of Dinwiddie County, that they consider construction of a road to directly connect the new toll road with Interstate 85 and U.S. 460 west of Petersburg a vital project if money can be found to pay for it.

"I think that's critically linked to this project at some point," said Tony Kinn, director of the Office of Transportation Public-Private Partnerships, which is managing the U.S. 460 toll project for Gov. Bob McDonnell.

The McDonnell administration has made the U.S. 460 project a top transportation priority because of its potential to boost economic development in a wide swath of the state by improving the flow of freight traffic from the Port of Virginia.

"We've always looked at this project as the building of a business corridor, not the building of a road," Kinn said.

But the project has run into opposition in Prince George because of its potential effect on homes and businesses around New Bohemia, a crossroads community where the toll road currently is designed to rejoin the existing highway east of Interstate 295.

Concerned property owners are scheduled to meet tonight in Disputanta with a Norfolk lawyer they have retained to prevent their properties from being taken or damaged by the state through use of eminent domain.

Ashcraft informed Transportation Secretary Sean T. Connaughton this week that Prince George would support the 460 project only if the state changes the proposed realignment, preferably to connect the toll road directly with I-295 or Interstate 95 south of Petersburg.

"In our opinion, the proposed Route 460 design of the western terminus is not the most economical juncture, unnecessarily disruptive, and not efficient for the future I-85 connector," Ashcraft told Connaughton in a letter on Tuesday.

Ashcraft said Prince George had supported the governor's new economic development grant program for port-related businesses in the region, but not at the expense of local communities.

"The board recognizes the economic impact the proposed Route 460 will have on our region but still does not find it necessary to divert the Port of Virginia traffic through the hamlet of New Bohemia," he said.

State officials agree that a different design might serve everyone's interests by lowering the cost of the project and increasing toll revenues, which would benefit both the Department of Transportation and the private contractor chosen to design and build the highway.

"I don't see any reason why somebody should not be happy about enhancements to the project" at the western terminus, Farajian said.

The problem for the state is the design of the Route 460 approved four years ago under the National Environmental Policy Act. Any change to the design that would go outside the approved boundaries would require a revision to the environmental plan for the project.

The current design creates an intersection between the new and old highways that is both complex and costly, Farajian said, while a direct connection with I-295 could boost toll revenues by an estimated 10 percent.

"We will do all we can to enhance it," Farajian said after the meeting.

Under the agreement endorsed last week by the Commonwealth Transportation Board, the contractor would not begin work on either terminus of the road for up to two years after the deal is made final in late December.

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Fluvanna schools brace for shortfall

By **BRYAN MCKENZIE**

PALMYRA - It doesn't figure to be a typical back-to-school open house tonight when the Fluvanna County School Board is scheduled to open its doors to county residents.

Plagued by budget shortfalls, school officials are seeking public input on possible cuts, including eliminating high school sports, closing schools on Fridays, shuttering outlying elementary schools and slashing jobs.

Many of the cuts were considered in May when county supervisors cut the school budget by almost \$1.2 million from the previous year. A subsequent budget amendment decreased the cut about \$530,000.

Tonight's community forum is to begin at 7 at the School Board office auditorium. The board expects to consider cuts at a Nov. 7 meeting. The measures would take effect Jan. 2.

Fluvanna schools face a \$308,173 shortfall that includes energy cost overruns for a recently opened high school, unexpected medical costs, and the expense of dismantling and removing more than two dozen trailers previously used for classes.

"The reality is we have to move quickly to recoup money into the budget," said Superintendent Gena Keller. "We have to make the budget work."

On Oct. 17, school officials asked the county for \$374,346 to offset the costs, but the motion from Supervisor Mozell Booker of Fork Union died without a second. Supervisors approved \$66,173 in carry-over funds for the schools but have been steadfast in refusing to provide additional county money.

"The Board of Supervisors has nothing to do with the School Board budget and what the School Board does to meet any deficit they have, we have no control over," said Supervisor Robert "Bob" Ullenbruch of Palmyra.

"We set the budget and the tax rate in May. They have had a budget with state and federal sources since July and should have had time to make any changes they needed to. If they are short, it's a problem in the school district, not with the Board of Supervisors."

Keller said the district made cuts in June but there was no wiggle room for unexpected costs.

"There is virtually no fat in the budget. Nothing to cut," she said. "School finance is a complicated issue with federal funds, grants, state funds, mandated programs and standards of quality that must be met to receive funding as well as average daily membership - the number of students in a class.

"We were in the position that we didn't want to kill everything at the start of the year if we didn't have to."

The school budget was a flashpoint in Fluvanna last spring. Opponents of increased property taxes crowded into hearings next to school backers clamoring for more money.

In March, the School Board approved a \$36.2 million budget, an increase of almost \$1.4 million over the previous year. In May, supervisors approved a \$33.6 million plan, a decrease of about \$1.2 million from the year before.

Booker, a former Charlottesville elementary school principal, wants to increase money for schools. In the past three years, she said, the system has slashed almost 50 jobs, mostly through attrition, and made other cuts.

"More than 80 percent of the budget is mandated to be spent in a particular manner in certain programs and that doesn't leave a lot of room," Booker said. "The schools had already cut a lot after Ms. Keller came in and we applauded them for it. We commended them for it. And then we cut them \$1.2 million. The fact that they are in this situation shouldn't be surprising."

This year, school officials cut 18 jobs, ordered three furlough days for administrators and two days without pay for other staff, eliminated field trips, pushed more health and all life insurance costs onto employees, eliminated local money for the adult literacy program and restructured other administrative positions.

"Had we at least provided level funding for the schools in this year's budget, this would not be an issue. As it is, these choices hurt the schools, the students, the teachers, the staff and the local businesses," Booker said.

"I'm not criticizing other board members for their decisions. I know they believe they made the right choices, but I just seriously disagree with it."

Ullenbruch said school staff members knew what the budget was and had time to address the cuts.

"At the end of the day, when they've known what their budget is for three months, to come back and say, 'We need \$308,000 to stay afloat,' well, it doesn't meet the smell test," Ullenbruch said.

"They need to address their own budget. If our finance department was \$300,000 short, we wouldn't ask the School Board for more money."

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Virginia considering toughening rules for fox penning

By Rex Springston

Virginia is considering tightening its control over fox penning.

Also called foxhound training, the practice involves trapping wild foxes, placing them in large, fenced, wooded preserves and chasing them with dogs.

The state Board of Game and Inland Fisheries asked game officials Thursday to suggest additional fox-penning regulations.

The board's action came after opponents and supporters of the pens spoke emotionally for about 45 minutes during the board's meeting in Richmond.

Most opponents asked that fox penning be banned or, over time, phased out.

"Even though it may not be intentional, when hundreds of dogs are pursuing the foxes, a lot of foxes are caught and torn apart limb by limb," said Yvonne Royster of Chesterfield County.

Supporters said penning is a misunderstood sport that allows dogs to be trained without getting on others' land.

"The goal is to provide quality chase opportunities, not to kill foxes," said Jennifer Hackett, representing the Virginia Foxhound Training Preserve Owners Association, a pen-owners' group.

Hackett said pen owners are already working with game officials to resolve potential problems. She said she doesn't oppose new regulations but doesn't want to see the fox chases shut down.

The game board oversees the state Department of Game and Inland Fisheries, which regulates hunting, fishing, boating and other activities.

The department's staff is expected to recommend new regulations to the board in March. If the board decides to formally propose the new rules, a public-comment period would follow. The board would adopt the new rules in June.

"I hope everyone can work in good faith to develop a ... solution," said board Chairman F. Scott Reed of Goochland County.

Nearly 5,000 foxes were trapped and put in about 40 pens over the past four years. Most pens are in rural parts of central and Southside Virginia.

Pen owners say they need to keep adding foxes because so many die naturally, escape or learn to hide. Opponents say owners keep adding foxes because dogs keep killing them.

Current rules require, among other things, that pens encompass at least 100 acres and have holes for foxes to hide in. New rules could involve requirements such as giving penned foxes time to learn their surroundings before a chase starts.

Robin Robertson Starr, the Richmond SPCA's chief executive officer, asked that fox penning be banned, not better regulated.

"Fox penning is animal fighting under any rational analysis. It is not hunting. ... There are no ethics of fair chase involved."

H. Kirby Burch of Powhatan County, representing two pro-hunting groups, told the board that that it's worthwhile to address issues such as noisy pens or the possible spread of disease in pens.

But Burch said compromising with pen opponents would be "sort of like" British efforts to appease Nazi leader Adolf Hitler in the 1930s.



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Western Tidewater localities unite to fight I-95 toll

Sussex County has committed \$7,500 in public money to defeat the state's plan to toll Interstate 95. Same for the city of Emporia and neighboring Greensville County.

Even the tiny township of Stony Creek has joined the fight. It's kicking in \$1,500.

The communities are among a growing collection of governments west of Hampton Roads that have contributed to a legal fund in their quest to stop the state from tolling I-95. The approach stands in contrast to a different battle over tolls in South Hampton Roads, where governments have stayed out of the fray, at least when it comes to kicking in cash.

In February, the Portsmouth City Council passed a resolution opposing the state's plan to toll the Downtown and Midtown tunnels for a \$2.1 billion public-private construction project. But when residents asked the city to join a lawsuit and help fund it, council members followed the advice of City Attorney Tim Oksman and declined, though some have contributed individually.

Oksman gave a public explanation for his position in March. By then, a group of residents, led early on by then-state Del. Kenny Alexander, had prepared a lawsuit but had not filed it because they were still trying to raise a legal fund.

In general, Oksman said, joining a lawsuit against the state could be exorbitantly expensive, adding that the city's being a plaintiff might actually hurt the suit's chances for success, and that even a successful court challenge might not stop the project.

He also hinted at potential political repercussions from suing the state or governor, saying that "there could be some severe consequences for the city," but he did not elaborate.

An email and voicemail seeking comment Tuesday from Oksman were not returned.

Opposition to the I-95 toll has not reached a lawsuit. A growing number of localities - more than a half-dozen as of this week - have retained the law firm Kutak Rock to help them challenge the state's plan.

Sussex County Administrator Thomas Harris said the toll, which is to be collected in his county, will decimate the county's tax base and harm its economy.

The localities, led by attorney Barry Steinberg, contend that the toll will have disproportionately negative impacts on poor and minority populations, and they are trying to get the Federal Highway Administration to require the state to produce a more detailed impact statement.

The toll, which would start at \$4 for passenger vehicles and three times that for tractor-trailers, would pay for improvements to the corridor.

Harris said the decision to file a lawsuit has not been made. The private sector is also working to stop the toll, he said.

Peggy Wiley, chairman of the Greensville County Board of Supervisors, said in a statement announcing the retention of the law firm, "We are willing to do whatever it takes to put an end to this horrible idea."

Patrick McSweeney, the attorney leading the private lawsuit against the tunnel tolls in South Hampton Roads, said he wasn't sure it would have made much of a difference if the city of Portsmouth had joined as a plaintiff. The case is ongoing.

Alexander, now a state senator, said city leaders from various South Hampton Roads localities have told him privately that they support the legal challenge. He said they didn't want to jeopardize other transportation projects by having their cities aid the fight.

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Source URL (retrieved on 11/01/2012 - 10:55): <http://hamptonroads.com/2012/10/western-tidewater-localities-unite-fight-i95-toll>



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Governor: I-95 toll isn't a done deal yet

Posted on: 5:29 pm, October 24, 2012, by [Lauren Mackey \(http://wtvr.com/author/wtvrlaurenmackey/\)](http://wtvr.com/author/wtvrlaurenmackey/),
updated on: 05:42pm, October 24, 2012

RICHMOND, Va. (WTVR) – Is the Governor changing his tune about a proposed toll on Interstate 95 in Sussex County?

During his “Ask the Governor” radio show in Richmond Wednesday morning, Governor Bob McDonnell says he knows a toll would create a hardship for people living in the area, and maintains a toll isn't a done deal yet.

In fact, the governor says he is also considering several other options, but says this is the best one on the table right now.

Additionally, he says he is also working with the localities around the proposed toll to determine the best location and the exact cost.

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- [More tolls coming to Virginia highways? \(http://wtvr.com/2012/10/16/more-tolls-coming-to-virginia-highways/\)](http://wtvr.com/2012/10/16/more-tolls-coming-to-virginia-highways/)
- [Drivers speak out against adding tolls on I-95 \(http://wtvr.com/2012/09/08/73766/\)](http://wtvr.com/2012/09/08/73766/)
- [Battle over new I-95 tolls intensifies in Emporia \(http://wtvr.com/2012/08/28/battle-over-new-i95-tolls-intensifies-in-emporia/\)](http://wtvr.com/2012/08/28/battle-over-new-i95-tolls-intensifies-in-emporia/)
- [County, town leaders plan to fight against I-95 tolls \(http://wtvr.com/2012/08/14/counties-oppose-interstate-95-toll-plan/\)](http://wtvr.com/2012/08/14/counties-oppose-interstate-95-toll-plan/)
- [HOLMBERG: Small town has big campaign against fat tolls on I-95 \(http://wtvr.com/2012/07/24/holmberg-small-town-has-a-big-campaign-against-fat-tolls-on-i-95/\)](http://wtvr.com/2012/07/24/holmberg-small-town-has-a-big-campaign-against-fat-tolls-on-i-95/)
- [HOLMBERG: Why does southern Virginia have to pay the tolls – again? \(http://wtvr.com/2012/06/22/why-does-southern-virginia-have-to-pay-the-tolls-again/\)](http://wtvr.com/2012/06/22/why-does-southern-virginia-have-to-pay-the-tolls-again/)
- [Lawmakers work to add tolls on Interstate 95 \(http://wtvr.com/2012/05/29/lawmakers-work-to-add-tolls-on-interstate-95/\)](http://wtvr.com/2012/05/29/lawmakers-work-to-add-tolls-on-interstate-95/)
- [Billboards aim to block I-95 toll proposal \(http://wtvr.com/2012/10/11/billboards-aim-to-block-i-95-toll-proposal/\)](http://wtvr.com/2012/10/11/billboards-aim-to-block-i-95-toll-proposal/)