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Techway short circuited by homes

Support for bridge remains strong despite Wolf stopping study

Dominic Bonaiuto

Regional leaders are scrambling this week to revive an examination of a new Potomac River crossing between the Northern Virginia and Maryland suburbs after the surprise defection of the study's champion.

The Federal Highway Administration announced late last week that it was canceling its year-long, \$2 million review of the so-called Techway at the request of U.S. Rep. Frank Wolf (R-10th), who said it's creating too much heartburn among area homeowners.

"I'm not going to be at war with the people I represent, saying this is better for you," Wolf said to a gathering of Times reporters and editors Tuesday.

Wolf said communities in northern Fairfax and Loudoun counties and those in southern Montgomery County, Md.,--particularly on the proposed bridge corridors--were simply too densely packed with homes.

Wolf presented a map with a spaghetti-like maze of proposed routes for the new bridge and parkway, all bisecting mature communities. One proposal even had the road cutting across the heart of Great Falls before crossing the river near McLean.

But the threat of taking homes has always been a factor with this project, and Wolf couldn't say why it's taken so long for planners and elected officials to reach this conclusion.

Moving the route further west put the bridge into Maryland's agricultural preserve and too far out to make a difference for commuters, Wolf said.

"I asked the Federal Highway Administration what the chances were of this road being built, and they said 10 percent was an optimistic figure," Wolf said.

Wolf to hold open house on Techway

U.S. Rep. Frank Wolf (R-10th) will be available to meet with the public to discuss his decision to stop a federal study of a new Potomac River crossing, also known as the Techway, from 4 to 7 p.m. Monday, June 4, at his Herndon office, 13873 Park Center Road Suite 130. Aerial maps of the proposed study area will be available for viewing all week in Wolf's local office. For more information, call (703) 709-5800.

Last week's announcement was a stunning blow to bridge advocates who say a new crossing is vital to sustaining the region's economy.

"Simply stopping this study doesn't eliminate the obvious need for another crossing," said Bob Chase, executive director of the Northern Virginia Transportation Alliance. "This just brings a greater sense of urgency ... the congestion clock is ticking."

Environmental groups, who chided the idea as nothing but a magnet for more traffic and development, were glowing in the wake of their surprise victory.

"I think it's great that someone in government finally said, 'Hey, this is a stupid idea,'" said Josephine "Jolly" de Give of the Piedmont Environmental Council.

But hopes for a new bridge are still alive.

The Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments' Transportation Planning Board, which is comprised of elected leaders from 17 local governments, is in the early stages of a "regional mobility and accessibility study."

Rob Kirby, the council's transportation director, says the study will look at improvements that are already planned and potential trouble areas and solutions.

"The possibility of a river crossing is in this, but we're taking a broad brush look," Kirby said.

The study is expected to wrap up in mid-2002.

In addition, Montgomery County, Md., is currently in the process of a countywide transportation analysis that includes a new bridge.

"We're more excited than not," said Patrick Herrity of the Northern Virginia Technology Council, which recently signed a joint agreement with the Maryland Technology Council to push for a new crossing.

Herrity said he expects an army of quiet supporters in the business and political communities to rise up in the wake of Wolf's decision.

Just two weeks ago, the speakers of the Maryland and Virginia House of Delegates told business leaders they would work together on the effort.

"All of us should expect more leadership from our elected officials, not less," said Bobbie Kilberg, president of the local tech council.

She pointed to a statement from Wolf last fall when the study was launched in which he said that he felt "a responsibility to give the people the information which a study can provide so that informed decisions can be made. Not to do so would be burying our heads in the sand and

closing our eyes to the reality of the transportation challenges in our region."

Many blame the "vocal minority" for fueling panic among homeowners near the river by circulating maps with possible bridge routes running through neighborhoods and threatening property values.

Stewart Schwartz, executive director of the Coalition for Smarter Growth, contends that it was the supporters who "did not paint a full picture of the impacts for the congressman."

Even if there was a corridor identified, Wolf noted that the project would be held up for years in litigation, much like what happened with the Woodrow Wilson Bridge, which had a considerably smaller impact on homes than the Techway.

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