

Frustration Mounts at the Occoquan

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Officials Resurrect Plan For Multi-Lane Crossing

By Spencer S. Hsu
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Before a single traffic light interrupts the flow of homeward-bound commuters on narrow Yates Ford Road every night, Jim Faulk, of Manassas, stews in his car in southern Fairfax County. Slowing from 40 miles per hour to a crawl on the twisting lane, Faulk joins a procession of 16,000 cars through the town of Clifton and over the Occoquan River on a maddening daily commute.

"It's real people out there. . . . It's a tough thing for everybody," Faulk told his Fairfax neighbors this week at a public meeting at Centreville High School. "I know

some of you say, 'I can't get out of my driveway.' But I'm the guy going past that driveway and waiting an hour for the traffic light."

Officials are hoping that Faulk and his neighbors can reach a compromise over a new commuter route that would unclog Yates Ford Road as well as make the commute quicker.

Showing a new resolve borne of desperation, Fairfax and Prince William County supervisors have resurrected talk of a politically unpalatable multi-lane highway over the Occoquan River, which separates the two counties. The plan resurrects the Ridgefield Road crossing, proposed several years ago to relieve overloaded Interstate 95 as well as Fairfax neighborhood roads glutted with commuters.

Fairfax supervisors noisily killed the plan in 1990. But since then, economic recovery, booming growth in Prince William and new feeder roads have been brewing a crisis, and officials in both counties are beginning to consider not only an expanded river

crossing on or near Yates Ford but a route farther west called the Tri-County connector. That road is in an even earlier stage of discussion.

"Everybody finally realizes there is a problem we can't put off any longer," said Fairfax Supervisor Michael R. Frey (R-July). "We're looking for how we solve that problem."

Last week, hundreds of residents on both sides of the Occoquan packed public meetings to bless the new initiative, at Prince William's government center and at Centreville High School.

Frey and Prince William Supervisor Terrence Spelane (I-Coles), co-chairmen of a bi-county subcommittee, asked residents for cooperation and shared sacrifice, not finger-pointing, as the counties begin drafting guidelines for a \$250,000 study of a new road by the Virginia Department of Transportation.

The Western Fairfax Transportation Study is to be

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Commuting Woes Revive Plan

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gin before the end of the year with results due by May 1996, after next year's county supervisor elections. Although construction would be years away and costs could reach hundreds of millions of dollars with no ready funding, planners are trying to build consensus first.

Authorities are studying a half-dozen corridors, from Route 123 to the east to Route 28 in the west, bounded north and south by the Fairfax and Prince William county parkways. Each poses engineering, environmental and political challenges, especially given the fact that each would blast through some of Fairfax's most affluent subdivisions.

But officials say they can't wait

any longer. Prince William's population is surging past 250,000. Meanwhile, area jobs increasingly turn up at Tysons Corner, Dulles and western Fairfax, not easily accessible by freeway.

"I don't want to be back here 10 years from now debating this issue," said James Chesley, Clifton's mayor. The road problem has become a crusade for the mayor, who lives along the commuter path. "Remember, the right decision is never the easiest decision."

So far, Fairfax County's powerful and fractious homeowners associations seem to be talking compromise. But then no one's interest is at stake yet. The Federation of Lorton Communities, Springfield District Council, South Run Creek Coalition

and a new group, the Occoquan Watershed Coalition, sent representatives to the Nov. 16 hearing, each claiming to represent tens of thousands of homeowners and residents.

"We must work together and not try to force one community to take it on the chin," said Mike Thompson, Springfield council member.

"We're all in this together," said Al Akers, of Fairfax Station. "We should be bigger than the individual districts in which we reside."

The study also is expected to include a bypass around Clifton and a proposal for two sites for light-rail commuter rail.

The supervisors' subcommittee is to set the scope of the study on Wednesday at Prince William's government center.

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