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Virginia races to redo costly I-95/395 HOT lanes

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May 14, 2010

The McDonnell administration and the contractors for the imperiled Interstate-95/395 toll lanes are scrambling to retool the project's design and financing, as they weigh whether the project is too costly to survive.

A proposal to build the region's second stretch of high-occupancy toll (HOT) lanes has been suspended since August because of a rash of neighborhood concerns and fears over whether it could secure financing.



(AP file photo)

Now, state transportation officials and Fluor-Transurban, the consortium selected to build the new lanes, are examining whether the venture is still realistic.

They are expected "very soon" to produce a new financial plan and retool the project's scope, possibly scaling back some of the more expensive improvements, said Virginia Transportation Secretary Sean Connaughton. The project's future likely hinges on those revisions.

"That needs to be done so we know whether the project is financially viable right now," he said.

Under the public-private partnership, the contractor would build and operate the lanes from Spotsylvania County to the Pentagon, using toll proceeds to pay for the construction and maintenance. In exchange, the state would see congestion relief along one of the area's most congested roads without a vast commitment of public resources.

The lanes would be free to buses, motorcycles and car poolers, while charging vehicles with fewer than three occupants. To move forward, Fluor-Transurban must believe the tolls will generate enough revenues to justify the massive undertaking, and investors must be willing to back it. Virginia also will need to resolve a federal lawsuit from Arlington County seeking to halt the new lanes.

"In the current economic environment, capital is much less available and more expensive," said project spokeswoman Jennifer Aument. "We're actively pursuing a variety of innovative options to help make the project work." For a similar toll project now under construction along the Capital Beltway -- through

the same contractor -- Virginia has committed \$400 million.

"We just simply don't have those types of resources" to pay for I-95/395 HOT lanes, Connaughton said. "We have limited ability to put money into this project," he said. "That's why we need to understand how much this is going to cost."

Gov. Bob McDonnell, a proponent of tolls, extolled HOT lanes on the 2009 campaign trail. Many lawmakers believe the projects are necessary to unravel suburban gridlock, especially with thousands of new military jobs headed to Fort Belvoir and the Mark Center by 2011.

"We're depending on it for some of the traffic mitigation," said Del. Joe May, R-Leesburg, chairman of the state House transportation committee. "I'm optimistic that we'll be able to work something out."

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