

Md. to consider alternative to new Bay Bridge

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After months of study by a task force on possible routes for another bridge across the Chesapeake Bay and a slew of comments from citizens opposed to the bridge in their neighborhoods, the Maryland Department of Transportation is now examining the viability of using mass transit to solve the worsening traffic problem.

The Task Force on Traffic Capacity Across the Chesapeake Bay last week released a report detailing four alternate regions for another bridge, but did not make a recommendation.

After a report predicted in 2004 that traffic across the Bay Bridge would increase by more than 40 percent by 2025, the state convened the task force to examine possible solutions to the traffic, which already amounts to about 95,000 cars on an average summer weekend day.

But a series of public meetings revealed that, while most residents of the counties that might host a new bridge believe a solution is needed, few of them want the bridge in their backyard. Instead, a number of residents suggested the state should consider transit as an alternative to building another bridge, which many believe would bring more traffic and sprawl to the Eastern Shore.

"We did not include transit in the original evaluation that we did. It was not one of the alternatives that the [Maryland Transportation] Authority included," said Transportation Secretary Robert Flanagan. "But we listened to the public input, and we respected that input and felt that it was important to respond to it."

The first step of the study is examining traffic patterns, Flanagan said, to determine where people are coming from and going to. After completing that examination, planners can examine possible transit modes, including rail and bus lines.

Flanagan expects the Transportation Authority, which owns and operates the bridge, and the Maryland Transit Administration to complete the study by the end of the year.

"What we're looking at is the tremendous congestion that's going to occur within 20 years on the Bay Bridge, and that the Bay Bridge would begin looking on weekdays like it now looks on weekends," Flanagan said.

At least one expert said transit would add a positive alternative to travel across the bay, but it seems unlikely to solve all of the traffic problems associated with the bridge.

University of Maryland engineering professor Hani Mahmassani, director of the Maryland Transportation Initiative, commended the transportation department's decision to examine transit options.

"The fact that there is none is an issue," Mahmassani said. "It's the right thing to do. Some form of alternative to the private automobile is desirable, but it's not likely to provide [for] the kind of capacity shortfall that is being projected."

While the predictions are dire, Mahmassani said they might not materialize without another crossing.

"When you're looking 20, 25 years down the road, and you're predicting something that is not sustainable or feasible, it means something different is going to happen. You're not practically going to have 12 hours of people waiting. So we know something else is going to happen. Either development won't materialize, or some other alternative is going to form that we aren't thinking about today."

Mahmassani suggested the ideal solution might be a mix of alternatives designed to meet the different mobility patterns across the bay.

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