

# Hampton council says widen HRBT

## City leaders say any Third Crossing plan should include improving the Hampton Roads Bridge-Tunnel.

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HAMPTON -- Hampton leaders want their regional counterparts to reconsider the planned so-called Third Crossing of Hampton Roads.

Mayor Ross A. Kearney II said it's more logical to add new lanes to the Hampton Roads Bridge-Tunnel rather than the parallel bridge-tunnel on Interstate 664, which would account for a large part of the Third Crossing.

Hampton City Council members Wednesday told the chief architect of Hampton Roads' highway construction plans that they want the region to include widening the bridge-tunnel on Interstate 64 now that there's some consideration of placing tolls on both bridge-tunnels to pay for more lanes.

"The public outcry that I have heard, in the discussions I've had with people, is if we're going to pay a toll, we need to do something with the Hampton Roads Bridge-Tunnel," Kearney said.

The council's push marks the most serious effort to gain support for widening the Hampton Roads Bridge-Tunnel since the Metropolitan Planning Organization endorsed widening the Monitor-Merrimac Memorial Bridge-Tunnel seven years ago.

Politicians of all stripes throughout the region say more lanes are needed across Hampton Roads in order to keep the region's economy healthy in the years to come. However, most city and state officials support the proposal that was adopted in 1997, which would widen all of I-664 and add another spur off of that bridge across the harbor to Norfolk and Portsmouth.

That route would provide easy access to highways for each of the region's major ports. But widening the Hampton Roads Bridge-Tunnel instead would do more to ease congestion on that bridge - one of the leading reasons for doing anything at all - and would be cheaper.

Hampton City Manager George Wallace suggested merging the two ideas: widening the Hampton Roads Bridge-Tunnel but also building the new link from the I-664 bridge to

Southside ports.

"We want to serve the economic interests of the region and we want to move traffic," said Wallace. "And our contention is that there's a different way to do that."

Major road projects need support from the Metropolitan Planning Organization - essentially an arm of the Hampton Roads Planning District Commission - in order to get federal funding.

Art Collins, the executive director of the planning district commission, told the Hampton City Council that the Hampton Roads Bridge-Tunnel still could be considered. He cautioned however that the project could be slowed at least another four years waiting for approval from federal regulatory agencies - approval already granted to the current plans.

The current proposal for the Third Crossing - priced at more than \$4 billion - was a primary focus of the transportation tax referendum that voters rejected 2-to-1 in 2002.

In the two years since, regional and state officials have pushed forward with the Monitor-Merrimac version. Two private groups have submitted proposals for so-called public-private partnerships to the Virginia Department of Transportation. Before becoming the head of the state's highway agency, Commissioner Philip Shucet served as the lead consultant as the region studied the best way to add more lanes of traffic across the waterway.

And in recent weeks, the planning district commission has said that tolls as high as \$2 would be needed to help cover the construction cost for the Third Crossing and a few other major road and tunnel projects. State money also would be required, but the General Assembly has been adamantly opposed to raising taxes to fund highway construction since the referendum failed.

Hampton Councilman Randy Gilliland said that tolls on the Hampton Roads Bridge-Tunnel without new lanes would drive a wedge between the economies of the Peninsula and South Hampton Roads.

"You can't be a regional thinker, in my opinion," he said, "and not build another tube on the Hampton Roads Bridge-Tunnel." n

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