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Increase in freight traffic by 2030 to pressure roads

By MARC SHAPIRO, Staff Writer

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The state's top transportation planners unveiled a proposal Monday to widen Interstate 97 between the Baltimore Beltway and Annapolis, part of a broader plan to handle a 75 percent increase in freight traffic projected by 2030.

During a daylong conference in Linthicum, newly appointed state Transportation Secretary Beverley Swaim-Staley said conversations about transportation challenges often lead back to truck, rail and ship traffic.

"Freight is not immune to the congestion we have here," said Swaim-Staley, who lives in Davidsonville. "We're going to have to wrestle (with) the issues of how to deliver our freight."

No funding has been linked to 100-plus projects outlined in the plan, described as the first statewide vision of how to manage freight traffic.

But the projects, discussed by speakers and panelists including U.S. Sen. Benjamin L.

Cardin, D-Md., and Reps. John P. Sarbanes,

D-Baltimore, and Donna Edwards, D-Prince George's, could cost \$35 billion.

"The freight plan gives us a multimodal look to make sure we're making the best use of our freight system," said Caitlin Hughes Rayman, assistant state secretary for transportation.

County highway projects mentioned in the plan include reconstructing and widening I-97 in two phases, from north of the Route 32 interchange to the Baltimore Beltway, and from Route 50 north to Route 32.

Another project would widen the beltway west of Baltimore Annapolis Boulevard in Linthicum and east to the Baltimore County line, and from Route 10 to the Interstate 895 spur. Both projects are rated as high priorities.

Funding could include a mix of public and private investment, depending on whose jurisdiction they fall under, Hughes Rayman said. The plan also will help in applying for federal funds.

Greg Slater, director of planning and preliminary engineering for the State Highway Administration, said the beltway and I-97 were selected because of the makeup of their traffic and not because of congestion. Widening is not the only step state officials are considering.

"There are things that can be done to change up traffic without necessarily expanding the highway," he said. "It's about looking at a complete intermodal approach."

Road maintenance, overnight truck parking and more tracks on rail lines through the area could help handle truck traffic.

"It's a long-term vision," Slater said. "We don't know what's actually needed out there yet."

Another top-priority project would cross Baltimore and Anne Arundel counties. It calls for a new interchange for CSX, the national freight train company that plans to connect the Midwest and the Mid-Atlantic with a \$700 million expansion project called the National Gateway.

Other projects in the county include the medium-priority widening of Route 50 between I-97 and Rowe Boulevard in Annapolis, a similar project between I-97 and the Prince George's County line, and setting up tolls on Route 50 in the Annapolis area.

Adding capacity to the Bay Bridge is listed as a low-priority project. The plan does not spell out any ways to boost freight capacity at BWI Thurgood Marshall Airport.

Several port and rail projects are also outlined in the plan. While none directly affects the BWI or Odenton rail stations, increased freight capacity could expand Amtrak and MARC train traffic.

"We have to fit our trains around freight trains," said Simon Taylor, assistant deputy administrator for the Maryland Transit Administration. "CSX doesn't want more MARC trains as of right now."

The state recently applied for \$360 million in federal stimulus money, some of which would be allocated for new platforms and an additional track at the BWI rail station.

Christian Johansson, state secretary of business and economic development, summed up the plan this way:

Freight "feeds all commerce. Market economies don't work well without sufficient transportation systems."

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