

With traffic on the minds of voters, some of Southern Maryland's elected officials gathered Tuesday to announce federal funding for several road and parking projects.

The officials -- all Democrats -- also outlined a long-term transportation vision that could include light rail and a bypass to congested U.S. Route 301.

Rep. Steny H. Hoyer, the House minority whip, said he has secured federal funding for eight major transportation initiatives and discussed an energy independence bill he introduced called the Program for Real Energy Security Act.

Hoyer was joined by state Sen. Roy P. Dyson (St. Mary's), state Dels. John L. Bohanan Jr. (St. Mary's) and Murray D. Levy (Charles) and Charles County Commissioner Edith J. Patterson (Pomfret) at the Mattawoman-Beantown Park & Ride in Waldorf.

The senior congressman said congestion on Southern Maryland's roadways is unbearable, adding that the United States faces a transportation crisis because of over-dependence on foreign oil.

"We need to address this in a focused, rapid fashion," Hoyer said. "Can we do it? Yes, we can. Do we need to do it? Yes, we do. Is it critical to our national security? Yes, it is."

Hoyer announced several federal appropriations:

- \$7 million to build six commuter parking facilities and acquire additional buses.

- \$11 million for the Hughesville Bypass along Route 5.

Millions for Highway Projects

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- \$12 million for improvements to Route 237 (Chancellor's Run Road).
- \$2 million for improvements to the Suitland Parkway and Route 4 interchange.
- \$1 million for improvements to Route 246 (Great Mills Road).
- \$16 million for a new interchange at the junction of Route 5 (Branch Avenue), Brandywine Road and Accokeek Road just north of Charles County.
- \$3 million for upgrades to Route 210 (Indian Head Highway).
- \$1 million for improvements to the Interstate 495 interchange at the Greenbelt Metro station, a major commuter hub for Southern Marylanders.

"Now, to talk about frustrations, the people riding the bus are frustrated, the people riding their cars are frustrated," Hoyer said of area traffic congestion. "No matter where you go, you've got to go through a chokepoint."

The officials said they hope the state will continue studying the feasibility of extending light rail service to Southern Maryland. Hoyer said that when Democratic gubernatorial candidate Martin O'Malley visited Waldorf last month, he took the Baltimore mayor to the rail line right of way that crosses Charles County and could be used to accommodate a light rail operation.

"Buses are critically important, but we need a rail line," Hoyer said. "It is a critical alternative available to us."

Dyson, who has been speaking with residents door-to-door in his reelection campaign this summer, said transportation is one of the most important issues to voters.

"The metropolitan area is inching its way down, and what's also inching its way down is the traffic problems," Dyson said.

Bohanan said it is important that officials at the local, state and federal levels work together to plan and secure funding for projects. He said it will take "teamwork, vision and focus to get this done."

Improved transportation infrastructure will help Southern Maryland -- the state's fastest-growing region -- handle projected growth, Levy said.

"When we have an effective and coordinated transportation system, it's not only good for economic development, but it's good for the environment," he said.

Patterson agreed that roadways are crucial to handling growth: "When we talk about the infrastructure we need here to support economic development, roads are very important."