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City of Alexandria, Virginia

MEMORANDUM

DATE: APRIL 21, 2021
TO: THE HONORABLE MAYOR AND MEMBERS OF CITY COUNCIL
FROM: MARK B. JINKS, CITY MANAGER /s/

DOCKET TITLE:

Deferral of Upper King Street Multimodal Improvements SMART SCALE Grant Application. [ROLL-CALL VOTE]

ISSUE: Consideration of whether to defer and withdraw the Upper King Street Multimodal Improvements SMART SCALE Round 4 grant application.

RECOMMENDATION: That City Council:

1. Defer the \$36.8 million Upper King Street Multimodal Reconstruction grant application to the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) SMART SCALE Round 4 (FY26 to FY27) program; and
2. Tentatively plan to resubmit an Upper King Street project for SMART SCALE (FY28 to FY29) funding consideration after the necessary civic engagement has been undertaken and a preferred alternative approved by City Council.

BACKGROUND: City Council, based on staff recommendations, on March 4, 2020 authorized submission to VDOT of five projects as part of SMART SCALE Round 4 funding for FY 2026 and FY 2027. Because SMART SCALE applications fund projects six years in the future, VDOT requires governing body advance approval of all grant applications. The City submission included a proposal for the Upper King Street Multimodal Reconstruction for up to \$40 million. The language in the March 4, 2020 docket memo notes the project “*would fund design, right-of-way and construction of traffic/multimodal and streetscape improvements along King Street between King/Quaker/Braddock and North Hampton Drive. Today, there is a significant lack of these facilities, contributing to safety needs along this corridor.*”

City planning documents reference community support for multimodal transportation, streetscape and stormwater investment in this important City gateway. In 2016, the Pedestrian and Bicycle Master Plan (now the Pedestrian and Bicycle Chapter of the Transportation Master Plan) identified this corridor as the highest priority sidewalk need in the City. In 2016 and 2017, the City applied for CMAQ-RSTP funding for safety enhancements on this corridor for FY 2023 and FY 2024. The 10-year CIP proposes community outreach in FY 2022 through the Complete Streets program and additional allotments of \$914,000 in FY 2023 and \$1 million in FY 2024 from CMAQ and RSTP. In 2020 the Alexandria Transit Vision Plan identified this corridor for all day, frequent bus service. Finally, in 2019 and 2020, T&ES received letters from nearby residents and stakeholders regarding stormwater and aesthetic issues along this corridor.

As part of SMART SCALE grant submissions, VDOT requires that each project demonstrate project readiness by including conceptual cross sections and project details that are often developed through a public planning process. As VDOT has gained more experience with the competitive SMART SCALE grant process and project scoring, VDOT has reasonably increased its expectation that the drawings shown in an application will be substantially what a jurisdiction will build. This has reduced the flexibility for amending projects post-grant award and will require the City to undertake more project planning and civic engagement pre-project grant application submission to VDOT, and less project planning post-project grant application submission to VDOT.

Because of perceived City Council support to address issues in this section of the Upper King Street corridor, the need to apply for SMART SCALE several years in the future and the application requirements, staff held an internal desktop planning review in early 2020 in the months leading up to the grant pre-application. This review considered existing traffic and crash data, adopted plan recommendations and infrastructure requests from some local stakeholders to better understand the possibilities within the available right-of-way to address the identified needs. Staff also developed several different potential project sketches with recognition that a robust public process would necessarily follow. In the grant submittal, staff made clear that configuration of the project elements would change during this process, and that the result of that public process would dictate a final preferred alternative. Upon VDOT’s request after the pre-application was submitted, staff put together pre-existing information to create a Planning Assessment. (The assessment is available online: <https://www.alexandriava.gov/uploadedFiles/tes/Upper%20King%20Planning%20Assessment%20Final%20-%20Combined.pdf>). However, no traffic modeling or further study was conducted as the sketches were solely intended to meet SMART SCALE application requirements.

DISCUSSION: The City initially requested \$39.9 million and VDOT staff recommended the project for \$36.8 million in funding. However, VDOT staff has since informed the City that significant changes to key elements of the project as depicted in the submitted cross sections would be considered “major scope changes” and would result in the project being re-scored and likely re-ranked in the grant competition. A significant re-scoring could mean the project would forfeit some or all the SMART SCALE funding because major changes to a project scope or fundamental elements require further review by a SMART SCALE review board and potentially a decision by the Commonwealth Transportation Board. VDOT scored the City’s application higher

because of the extent of multimodal access as shown in the submitted drawings, congestion mitigation, and efficiency of traffic flow as depicted in the conceptual sketch. If VDOT approves the project as depicted for \$36.8 million and a future preferred City alternative differs substantially from the sketch, the City almost certainly risks losing some or all future SMART SCALE funds for this project. This introduces significant uncertainty and could also result in significant delay to any construction funding for this corridor. It is staff's judgement that it is better to defer an Upper King Street grant application now by withdrawing it, and to then start the community engagement and planning process in the fall of 2021.

The City has three other SMART SCALE projects that have scored well and are likely to be funded:

1. Route 1 at East Glebe intersection - widening eastbound East Glebe Road to add a right turn-only lane at the intersection of Route 1. Total funds recommended by VDOT: \$3,112,946;
2. Route 1 South Median Refuge Island - build a median along South Patrick Street to provide pedestrian refuge as recommended in the South Patrick Street Affordable Housing Strategy. Total funds recommended by VDOT: \$4,280,499; and
3. Landmark Mall Transit Center - construct a high-quality transit center within the new Landmark Mall redevelopment to serve two BRT lines and several local bus routes. Total funds recommended by VDOT: \$12,997,054.

These projects are all consistent with approved City plans and ranked in the order of funding priority by VDOT staff. The City's first two projects were scored #3 and #4 overall in the entire state, and the Landmark Transit Center is just outside the top 20 overall projects. Upper King Street, recommended for \$36.8 million, was the lowest-scoring City project, although within the VDOT staff-recommended funding scenario. Therefore, staff believes the City's initial three projects totaling \$20 million have a very good chance of being recommended for funding by the CTB.

FISCAL IMPACT: There will be no fiscal impact associated with this action. Staff proposes to withdraw Upper King Street from Round 4 of SMART SCALE, conduct additional traffic analysis and complete a robust community process with the goal of developing a City Council-adopted preferred alternative. Once this process is complete, but no sooner, staff would likely re-submit the project to a future round of SMART SCALE, or other grant program. SMART SCALE Round 5 would provide funding in FY 2028 and FY 2029. A pre-application window would likely open sometime in calendar year 2022 and would remain open into the City's FY 2023, giving the City ample time to conduct traffic analysis, to undertake full community engagement, and to develop a proposed project design. If the community engagement and planning exercises end up taking longer than anticipated, the City can also apply to other grant programs, such as the NVTA 70% program in 2024 for funding in FY 2028 and FY 2029.

ATTACHMENT: Resolution

STAFF:

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