

NCDOT plan fights urban congestion with light-rail and freeway upgrades

THE NEWS AND OBSERVER BY BRUCE SICELOFF - STAFF COLUMNIST DECEMBER 4, 2014

RALEIGH — A new state emphasis on tackling urban traffic jams is reflected in a 10-year transportation spending plan released Thursday, and that could be good news for commuters who clog Triangle freeways every workday.

It's the first transportation plan to be shaped by Gov. Pat McCrory's Strategic Mobility Formula, which gives priority to road and transit projects that cut congestion and promote safety and economic development. The formula was written into law in 2013 with bipartisan legislative approval, replacing a 1989 law that assigned less priority to the growth-related needs of North Carolina's urban centers.

In the Triangle, the draft 2015-2025 State Transportation Improvement Program includes the state Department of Transportation's commitment to:

- Help pay for a 17-mile light-rail line from UNC Hospitals in Chapel Hill to Duke University and downtown Durham, with construction tentatively pegged to begin in 2020.
- Add lanes to 30 miles of Interstate 40: From Interstate 85 to U.S. 15-501 in Orange County; from Wade Avenue to Lake Wheeler Road in Cary and Raleigh, and from the Raleigh Beltline to N.C. 42 in Johnston County.
- Convert Raleigh's Capital Boulevard (U.S. 1) to a freeway between the northern 540 Outer Loop and N.C. 98 at Wake Forest. A freeway conversion also is planned for South Miami Boulevard between T.W. Alexander Drive and Lynn Road in Durham. Other clogged intersections in Durham and Wake counties will be upgraded to freeway-style interchanges.

"We're seeing some very important projects for this region move forward," said Joe Milazzo II, executive director of the Regional Transportation Alliance, a business advocacy group.

A more competitive N.C.

The state Board of Transportation is to adopt the 10-year plan in June, after a public review period. Speaking Thursday to the board, most of whose 19 members he appointed, McCrory said the new transportation spending plan is part of his effort to make North Carolina more competitive with other states and regions.

"We're developing a vision not just for here and not for the next election, but for the next generation," McCrory said. "It will be a vision that we will sell jobs about."

He thanked legislative leaders attending the meeting for moving quickly last year to replace the "equity formula" that balanced spending between rural and urban areas since 1989 and, critics said, was vulnerable to undue political influence.

McCrory said drivers have been frustrated by piecemeal improvements that widen busy highways for a few short miles here and there, leaving scattered narrow stretches he called chokepoints.

"One of our goals now is to deal with these chokepoints that we have throughout the state, that have deterred the economic potential of small towns and large cities alike," McCrory said. "And we've got to unleash those chokepoints."

Among the highway corridors to be improved in the new plan are U.S. 70 in Eastern North Carolina and U.S. 74, seen as an underused route from Asheville through Charlotte to Wilmington. McCrory and Transportation Secretary Tony Tata also pointed to projects that would improve highway connections to economic centers in neighboring states, including an interstate upgrade for U.S. 17 to Virginia's Hampton Roads area.

Tata cited the Virginia connection when he promoted another big project in the 10-year plan: construction of the Mid-Currituck Bridge primarily for northern tourists who visit the northern Outer Banks. That project has struggled in recent years as legislative leaders signaled little support for a partnership with private developers, proposed by the N.C. Turnpike Authority, to build and operate the bridge as a toll project.

Tolls are planned for completion of the 540 Outer Loop in southern and eastern Wake County. The new DOT plan schedules construction on the southern section, but it stops short of promising that the eastern leg will be built before 2025.

Perry Safran, a Raleigh attorney who chairs the turnpike authority, noted that the plan includes projects to finish toll-free loops around Fayetteville, Greensboro and Winston-Salem. He said the state should not hold back on a project DOT calls "Complete 540."

"That is my disappointment," Safran said. "A loop is a loop, and it needs to be finished in its entirety as soon as possible."

The 10-year plan also includes setbacks for other Triangle projects. Near the state fairgrounds in West Raleigh, DOT had planned to start work in 2019 on a \$28 million tunnel to bury Blue Ridge Road beneath Hillsborough Street and nearby railroad tracks. The new plan doesn't mention the tunnel.

'Some losers'

DOT is building a Rolesville bypass in northern Wake County as part of a plan to widen U.S. 401 farther north to Louisburg in Wake County. The most recent schedule called for construction to start in 2017 on the last 10.4-mile leg of U.S. 401, but this work is delayed indefinitely in the new plan.

"There are some losers in the plan," said Joey Hopkins, DOT's Division 5 engineer, who oversees DOT work in Wake, Durham and five neighboring counties. "U.S. 401 is real big to the folks in Franklin County, and that's one that just missed the cut and didn't score well enough to get funded north of Rolesville."

The new formula ranks projects in tiers of statewide, regional and division-level importance. DOT evaluated project costs and benefits based on objective criteria, and local elected leaders who serve on rural and metropolitan planning boards also contributed to project scores.

On a project to widen Interstate 40 south from Raleigh's Beltline, DOT officials had proposed to postpone the southernmost leg from the Johnston-Wake county line to N.C. 42 in Johnston County. But after Johnston County officials said the entire project was important, DOT agreed to start work in 2018 on the widening for all 11 miles from the Beltline to N.C. 42.

McCrory and Tata said the new formula enables DOT to spend money more efficiently on road and other improvements. But gas tax and other transportation revenues are flattening out as the state continues to grow, and McCrory said he will ask the legislature next year to consider new ways to raise money for transportation needs.

Triangle projects in the plan

Here are local highlights from the draft 2015-2025 Transportation Improvement Program.

Durham County

- Upgrade the N.C. 54 corridor for 9.2 miles from U.S. 15-501 to N.C. 55 (\$228.6 million, construction starting in 2024).
- Widen 1 mile of Alston Avenue from N.C. 147 to Holloway Street (\$38.7 million, 2015).

Orange County

- Widen I-40 to six lanes, 10 miles from I-85 to U.S. 15-501 (\$88 million, 2024).

Wake County

- Make U.S. 1 a freeway from I-540 to N.C. 98 (\$206.6 million, 2023).
- Upgrade U.S. 64 with interchanges, 3 miles from Laura Duncan Road to U.S. 1 in Cary (\$90.8 million, 2022).
- Upgrade Glenwood Avenue with interchanges, 2 miles from T.W. Alexander Drive to I-540 (\$58.4 million, 2021).
- Add lanes to Interstate 40: 11 miles from Raleigh Beltline to N.C. 42 in Johnston County (\$157 million, 2018); 4.4 miles in South Raleigh from I-440 to Lake Wheeler Road (\$25.5 million, 2022); 4.2 miles in West Raleigh from Wade Avenue to I-440 (\$37.7 million, 2023).
- Add lanes to I-440, 4.6 miles from Cary to Wade Avenue (\$110.6 million, 2018).
- Upgrade I-40 interchanges near Raleigh-Durham International Airport: Aviation Parkway in 2018, Airport Boulevard in 2020.
- Build a tunnel under Western Boulevard at Avent Ferry Road for pedestrians and bicyclists (\$5 million, 2020).
- Replace Capital Boulevard bridges over Peace Street and under Wade Avenue (\$68.4 million, 2016).
- Extend Morrisville Parkway 1.8 miles to the 540 Outer Loop in Morrisville (\$41.8 million, 2016).
- Widen the last two-lane stretch of N.C. 55, 2.8 miles, through Apex (\$8.1 million, 2021).
- Overhaul I-440 interchanges at Glenwood Avenue and Blue Ridge Road (\$59 million, 2025).
- Install ramp meters at I-540 interchanges between Leesville and Falls of Neuse roads (\$1.1 million, 2016).
- Widen N.C. 54 1.3 miles from 540 Outer Loop to Perimeter Park in Morrisville (\$11.8 million, 2023).

Source: ncdot.gov

DOT picks builder for East End Connector

The Herald-Sun By Ray Gronberg Dec. 23, 2014 @ 05:10 PM

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DURHAM — With a winning bid of \$141.9 million, one of the American branches of a Spanish construction company that ranks among the world's largest has secured the right to build Durham's East End Connector.

The N.C. Department of Transportation in November awarded the project to Dragados USA Inc., the lowest of the five bidders for a project that will create a long-awaited direct link between the Durham Freeway and U.S. 70.

"We're real happy to see this contract awarded and are looking forward to working with Dragados," said Joey Hopkins, chief engineer of DOT's Division 5. "A lot of people are looking forward to the completion of this project. We want it to get rolling and are anxious to see dirt moved."

Dragados is a wholly-owned subsidiary of the ACS Group, a conglomerate headquartered in Madrid that as of 2013 ranked behind only a trio of state-owned Chinese companies on the list of the world's largest construction firms, as measured by annual revenue.

As it happens, another ACS subsidiary, Flatiron Constructors Inc., was the No. 2 bidder for the project. It lost out by offering to build the new freeway for \$146.8 million.

Majority-owned by ACS, Flatiron has won DOT projects before, sometimes fending off competition from Dragados.

DOT on those occasions sought and received assurances the companies had independent management, and did likewise this time before awarding the contract to Dragados, Hopkins said.

Though it has competed for DOT projects before, Dragados has “never worked in North Carolina” until now, he added. “They’re new to us, we’re new to them.”

The No. 3 bidder, Balfour Beatty Infrastructure Inc., the U.S. arm of a British construction giant, asked \$149.8 million.

Like the two bids from the ACS-owned companies, Balfour Beatty’s offer clocked in below DOT’s construction-cost estimate for the project of \$151.7 million.

The same could not be said of the offers from the two U.S. firms that submitted bids, S.T. Wooten Corp. and W.C. English Inc.

Wooten, a North Carolina company based in Wilson, sought \$172.0 million. English, based in Virginia, wanted \$185.6 million.

The contract award specified that the project site — a strip of land east of Durham Tech and the Durham Freeway’s existing Briggs Avenue interchange — will be “available” to the builder for work to start in February.

Hopkins said DOT is setting up a meeting between its staff, Dragados management and several utility companies. Among other matters, they’ll settle the timing of the early stages of the project.

The Durham Freeway end of the connector appears the more likely candidate for early activity, as DOT is still getting its ducks in a row on the U.S. 70 end.

There, “we’re still finishing up right of way acquisition and still moving utilities, or having utility companies move utilities,” Hopkins said. “All of that has been going on for months and months now, but there’s still a little more to do.”

He added that the U.S. 70 end also promises to be the toughest continuing challenge for Dragados and DOT over the four-year life of the project.

“The 70 end is going to take the longest to do,” he said. “It’s a big interchange, a lot of utilities, a lot of conflicts and the railroads you’re dealing with. It’s complicated to deal with.

And “if you get behind [schedule there] at the beginning, you’re going to stay behind; it’s going to be hard to catch up.”

Like ACS proper, Dragados has Spanish roots, having been founded in that country in 1941. The companies merged in 2003.

Worldwide, ACS as of 2013 employed 157,689 people. It booked a 702 million euro profit that year, with the Dragados arm accounting for 101 million euros of that.

Dragado specializes in heavy construction, building roads, bridges, tunnels and subways throughout Europe and the Americas. Its road portfolio includes a major bypass around Montreal, a project that included a new crossing of the St. Lawrence River.

The company scored a dual success in recent DOT bid openings, also winning the right to build a \$154 million segment of Winston-Salem’s long-planned northern beltway.

DOT officials delayed bidding on the East End Connector by a month to give firms a chance to compete for both those projects.

If all goes according to plan, the East End Connector should open to the motoring public in 2019, Hopkins said.

NC gas tax and TriEx toll rates will rise in 2015

The News and Observer By Bruce Siceloff December 30, 2014

RALEIGH — Starting Thursday, the first day of 2015, North Carolina drivers will pay an additional penny tax on every gallon of gas. Drivers on the state's only toll road will pay a bit more, too.

The motor fuels tax will rise from 36.5 to 37.5 cents per gallon for both gasoline and diesel fuel, the highest rate allowed under current state law, the state Department of Revenue said.

That will make North Carolina's the highest gas tax in the South. If current rates in other states are unchanged, North Carolina will have the highest gas tax in all but eight other states, according to the American Petroleum Institute.

A 2013 state law capping the state gas tax at 37.5 cents is due to expire June 30, 2015. Without the law, the new tax rate would be a fraction of a penny higher, 37.7 cents. The rate is set by a formula: 17.5 cents plus either 3.5 cents or 7 percent of the average wholesale fuel price, whichever is higher.

The new tax rate was based on wholesale prices between April and September. Fuel prices have fallen sharply since then. If they stay low over the next three months, the tax rate will be reduced next July.

Also starting Thursday, the state will increase toll rates by about 5 percent on the Triangle Expressway in Research Triangle Park and western Wake County, the state Department of Transportation said.

The 17.4-mile trip from N.C. 147 at Interstate 40 to N.C. 55 at Holly Springs will rise 14 cents to \$2.91 for drivers who pay with Quick Pass and other transponders. It will rise 22 cents to \$4.45 for other drivers, who are billed by mail.

Plans are underway for upgrades that will add two interchanges to the Triangle Expressway: one in western Cary at Morrisville Parkway, and the other at Old Holly Springs/Apex Road between U.S. 1 and N.C. 55 at Holly Springs.