

Diverging diamond interchange could help ease Triangle road congestion

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RALEIGH, N.C. — As the Triangle grows, many interchanges often have too much traffic to handle. To help ease the backups, the North Carolina Department of Transportation is introducing a new type of interchange design to the Raleigh area.

Diverging diamond interchanges look a bit confusing, but engineers say they will work wonders to reduce traffic congestion.

In a diverging diamond, drivers temporarily switch sides of the road and are able to make a left turn onto an interstate without having to wait for a gap in traffic.

"We operate more efficiently having more movements going at the same time instead of having cars just sitting there waiting for their green ball or their green arrow," DOT engineer Jim Dunlap said.

Three diverging diamond interchanges have already been constructed in the Charlotte area, and more are planned around the state, including three in Wake County.

Crews could begin construction by 2018 on interchange updates at Western Boulevard and Interstate 440, Wake Forest Road at I-440 and Airport Boulevard at Interstate 40.

"When you look at it from the top view, it looks very confusing," Dunlap said. "When you drive, it looks like any other road. In the right location, it's probably going to be a no-brainer to do this."

Another benefit for the DOT is that it is cheaper to retrofit an interchange with the diverging diamond design than to build a brand new interchange.

Dunlap says Wake Forest Road at I-440 will likely be the first construction location in Wake County. Engineers are also considering a similar design at N.C. Highway 42 and Interstate 40 in Johnston County.

Read more at <http://www.wral.com/diamond-interchange-could-help-ease-triangle-road-congestion/14470572/#8bbmvCKYdKdCJ8j9.99>

Proposed transportation budget counts on higher gas tax receipts

The News and Observer By Bruce Siceloff March 5, 2015

Gas tax collections are expected to fall by several hundred million dollars over the next two years, under a statutory formula that pegs the tax rate to plunging oil prices.

But in his transportation budget, released Thursday, Gov. Pat McCrory avoids drastic cuts in state spending for road construction and bridge repairs.

McCrory's budget assumes that the General Assembly will change the law this spring, to fix the gas tax at 35 cents a gallon. The Senate approved this adjustment last month, in order to keep the gas tax from dropping to a projected average 30.4 cents in fiscal year 2015-16 and 31.3 cents in 2016-17.

His budget makes use of \$475 million in additional gas tax receipts that will be available for the state Department of Transportation only if the Senate plan – or something like it – becomes law.

"We assumed the Senate proposal in modeling revenues for purposes of a forecast," said Lee Roberts, the state budget director. "That was the only proposed legislation that was out there when we put the budget together."

But the House has different ideas about the gas tax. Instead of setting a minimum rate of 35 cents for future years, the House changed the Senate bill this week to set the rate at 36 cents for the rest of 2015, then allow the tax to plunge in January. Each penny of gas tax is worth \$52 million for DOT, so the reduced tax would force layoffs and spending cuts worth a few hundred million dollars.

In McCrory's budget, the Division of Motor Vehicles would receive an additional \$30.5 million in technology upgrades for its automated driver's license system. Powell Bill funds to help towns and cities with street maintenance needs would be cut by \$9.6 million, or about 6 percent. Other funds are moved around to put \$113.7 million more in DOT maintenance reserves for state road preservation work.

Without offering details, the governor reiterated his proposal for \$1.2 billion to \$1.4 billion in transportation bonds – borrowed money the state would use for road construction projects.

Key stat: Not counting \$1.17 billion in federal money, the state DOT budget for the year that ends June 30 is \$3.19 billion. McCrory's budget predicts a slight drop to \$3.16 billion for fiscal year 2015-16.

Anything's possible: Legislators will be negotiating this spring over much more than a one-penny difference between possible gas tax rates. House leaders say they are determined to settle on new and increased revenue sources to generate at least \$1 billion a year for expanded transportation spending in the future, and that would mean a big expansion for the DOT budget.

Triangle Transit discusses light-rail options with Council

The Herald-Sun By Ray Gronberg Mar. 05, 2015 @ 06:50 PM

DURHAM —Routing a new light-rail line along Durham-Chapel Hill Boulevard near the Garrett Road intersection will add to the cost of a new light rail line between the two cities, Triangle Transit officials say.

A routing adjacent to the boulevard from the Martin Luther King Jr. Parkway southwest to the Patterson Place area would cost \$16.3 million more to build than the agency's original idea of putting it on new right-of-way 600 yards or so to the southeast.

It would also cost \$180,000 more a year to operate after the line is put into operation in the mid-2020s, according to figures Triangle Transit's planning manager, Patrick McDonough, gave the City Council on Thursday.

A slightly different routing that makes its bend toward the boulevard nearer to Garrett Road wouldn't cost as much more, but would still be pricier than the original idea.

It would take an extra \$3.4 million to build, and an extra \$75,600 a year to operate, McDonough said, summarizing the analysis that's going to the line's draft environmental impact statement.

The point of doing the work is to decide whether building the project at all promises "greater benefits to the community than its costs and impacts," McDonough said.

Analysts have a similar routing dilemma on the edge of Chapel Hill, with a choice of three main possibilities. Triangle Transit also has to decide among possible options of where to put the system's maintenance shop.

Construction-wise, the least-expensive combination of choices would cost about \$1.5 billion in present-day dollars to build.

Triangle Transit is studying routing options in the Garrett Road area because a local advisory group, the New Hope Creek Corridor Advisory Committee, opposes the agency's original idea for that area.

Putting the line on new right of way means building a new crossing of New Hope Creek. The advisory committee argues for a next-to-the-boulevard placement to use existing right of way and minimize the impact to the creek.

But to put the line next to the boulevard, using either option for doing so, Triangle Transit likely would have to buy a couple more bits of property than it otherwise would need.

Any of the three choices will affect about the same amount of "biotic area" around the stream, but the boulevard options will touch an acre or two less of the creek's bottomland.

Toward Chapel Hill, the numbers are more obviously in favor of routing options that avoid a passage through the Meadowmont neighborhood, even though Meadowmont was designed in the 1990s to accommodate a rail connection.

Meadowmont activists have lobbied for a routing next to or south of N.C. 54. Either choice promises to add at least 720 boardings to the line's predicted daily ridership, likely for putting it closer to the Friday Center.

The through-Meadowmont option that's still on the table would actually add \$36 million to predicted construction costs and also would be more expensive to operate than either of the N.C. 54 options.

That's the likely result of a decision by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to veto as unnecessary a crossing of federal land just east of Meadowmont. The remaining through-Meadowmont option detours a bit to the north to avoid the Corps-managed land, at the cost of a less-direct route for trains and the need to place more track.

The routing closest to N.C. 54 appears the more expensive of the two non-Meadowmont options, engineers figuring it would cost \$7.6 million to build. The other would place the line closer to the Friday Center and farther from the road.

Triangle Transit is planning a series of public meetings to discuss the project and the environmental-report findings. One is coming up March 18 at the Friday Center, from 4-7 p.m.

Sidewalks top council's to-do ranking for Durham

Members don't want people walking in the streets

THE NEWS AND OBSERVER BY JIM WISE 03/10/2015 12:00 PM

DURHAM -- Asked to pick priorities among 10 costly city projects, City Council members put sidewalks at the top -- by 18 points.

"That's one good clear signal, and one good clear signal is great," Councilman Steve Schewel said.

In conjunction with preparing the city's 2015-16 budget, in February City Manager Tom Bonfield asked council members to rank a set of big-ticket capital projects -- estimated costs ranging from \$10 million to \$35 million -- so city administrators would have an idea of which are worth pursuing in the relatively near term.

With a total estimated cost of \$150.8 million, the 10 are "really big projects" that have not been factored into the city's long-range revenue and spending models, "but are everywhere in people's conversations," Bonfield said.

"We can't afford it all and we need to ... decide where to go," he said.

To do their rankings, the council used a "paired comparison analysis" (nando.com/uwash), an objective system that is, Bonfield said, useful when "comparing apples with oranges."

A \$15-million package including an update of the 2006 DurhamWalks! plan and constructing some of the plan's highest-priority sidewalks that currently have no funding in the pipeline, had a consensus score of 11, on a scale in which the lower the number, the higher the ranking.

In second place with 29 points, at \$24.8 million, came "Station Area Strategic Infrastructure" (SASI) -- road, pedestrian-bicycle, "streetscape" and other construction for access to stations on the planned Durham-Orange Light Rail line.

"I'm delighted to see those two pieces of infrastructure at the top of the list," said Councilman Don Moffitt, pointing out that sidewalks are part of the station-area package and adding that the most recent citizen-opinion survey also showed new sidewalks to be a top priority for the public.

"I ranked sidewalks high because I see so many people walking in the streets," said Mayor Pro Tem Cora Cole-McFadden, "especially in northern Durham."

The rest, in descending order of priority, with rough cost estimates:

- A multi-field athletic complex capable of hosting local and regional events: \$15 million. 33 points.
- Aquatic center: \$10 million. 34 points.
- Completion of Fayetteville Street widening: \$12.5 million. 36 points.
- Duke Beltline trail: \$10 million. 37 points.
- Central Park district parking garage: \$10 million. 37 points.

- Downtown Loop two-way conversion: \$35 million. 38 points.
- Downtown parking garage: \$10 million.\$18.5 million. 41 points.
- Suburban recreation center: \$10 million. 49 points.

Parking garages

Group consensus notwithstanding, there was a diversity of opinion among the seven individual council members. Mayor Bill Bell, for example, was high on the two parking garages.

"I looked at the problems we have about parking downtown," he said. "We're still trying to grow the downtown area, and I get comments from restaurant owners that say, 'Hey, you're squeezing us out with some of the parking issues we have.'

"We can't continue the development we have downtown without parking," Bell said. "We've got to build them whether we like it or not."

Councilman Eugene Brown had a similar opinion.

"In 2007, office parks in suburbia peaked," Brown said, "and now the entire movement has come back to the city, not just for housing but with offices, with businesses. We need to be ready for that curve."

Councilwoman Diane Catotti said the city shouldn't have to carry that cost alone.

"Parking garages and the Downtown Loop (two-way conversion) are things our business community is requesting, and I feel like they can make significant contributions to help us get those built," she said.

Private developers could also be expected to cover some costs of the station-area infrastructure, too, she said. Brown echoed that opinion, but ranked the station-area work only eighth and reminded his colleagues that funding for the light-rail line remains uncertain.

"It would be rather foolish of us to spend the \$25 million ... to prepare these sites and then find, lo and behold, we can't afford a transit system because we can't get enough (money) from the state government or the federal government," he said.

Plans for the light-rail line anticipated half the construction cost coming from the Federal Transit Authority and 25 percent from the state, the other 25 percent from a half-cent sales tax Durham and Orange County voters approved in 2012 and 2013.

"This is almost sort of a chicken and egg (situation) except who's in control of the chicken?" Brown said. "With the transit issue, we're not in control of the chicken. That's federal and state government, and we don't want to be left with egg on our face if we do all this and the transit system doesn't happen."

Whether and when any of the projects go into the city's revenue and spending modules remains to be determined, though.

"There are lots of other capital improvement needs," Councilman Don Moffitt said.

Triangle's buses are going to a Go, Go and Go

The News and Observer By Bruce Siceloff 03/11/2015

Raleigh's Capital Area Transit buses will carry new "GoRaleigh" labels and Durham's DATA buses will say "GoDurham" starting March 25 – and Triangle Transit's regional buses will sail under a "GoTriangle" banner.

The coordinated effort is part of a regional rebranding for transit agencies that began merging their fares, routes, marketing and planning efforts a few years ago.

"By choosing 'Go' as part of our name, we want to transform the travel experience with a new look and safe, reliable, convenient public transit as a preferred transportation choice," Lauren Parker, Triangle Transit marketing director, said in a news release.

Cary's C-Tran buses will be rechristened "GoCary" in 2016. That leaves Chapel Hill Transit as the lone holdout among the region's municipal bus services.

Bill calls for end to highway corridor development restrictions

WRAL.com By Matthew Burns Posted 3/17/2015

RALEIGH, N.C. — Following a recent state Court of Appeals ruling that put the state on the hook for paying Forsyth County property owners in the path of a proposed highway, the General Assembly is looking at scrapping the law that led to the court case.

The Map Act was adopted in 1987 to set aside corridors for future highways before they became developed. Property owners in those corridors have complained for years, however, saying the designation prevents them from improving their land and discourages anyone from buying property in the corridor.

Jim Deans, whose land in southern Wake County has been in the corridor for the N.C. Highway 540 toll road since 1996, said he hasn't been able to unload the 17 acres he wanted to sell to help fund his retirement.

"We're watching the trees grow. We're paying taxes on it. But we can't sell it, and we can't develop it," Deans said.

What's worse, he said, is after more than two decades in limbo, the state Department of Transportation could eventually choose not to buy his land for the highway, meaning he gets nothing for waiting all that time.

The Map Act violates the Fifth Amendment to the Constitution, Deans said, noting his property and others have been taken for public use without just compensation.

The Court of Appeals said as much last month when it ruled that DOT must compensate property owners in a protected corridor for a highway north of Winston-Salem. The judges said the Map Act was simply a tool for the state to hold down the cost of property acquisition for roads and effectively put the state in control of private property for years without any benefit to the property owners.

"This is a bad law that has been used in a very bad way on too many people for too long," Matthew Bryant, an attorney for the Forsyth County property owners, told lawmakers Tuesday.

Rep. Rayne Brown, R-Davidson, a primary sponsor of House Bill 183, which would repeal the Map Act, said North Carolina built highways for decades before the law was passed and can do so again.

The House Transportation Committee is expected to discuss the bill next week.

Work to begin on East End Connector

THE HERALD-SUN FROM STAFF REPORTS MARCH 17, 2015

RALEIGH — N.C. Department of Transportation contractors will begin work this week on the East End Connector in Durham. Crews will begin clearing, grubbing and erosion control. This part of the project is not expected to have any traffic impacts.

The \$142 million, 3.9-mile project will provide a direct freeway connection designed to interstate standards between the Durham Freeway and north of the U.S. 70/N.C. 98 intersection. It will also upgrade U.S. 70 to a freeway between Pleasant Drive and N.C. 98.

The Connector will provide a freeway link between I-85 and I-40, the Triangle Expressway and U.S. 1 in southern Wake County.

A project first discussed nearly six decades ago, it will include two lanes in each direction, with space for a future third lane each way. In addition to a new highway, the project also involves the construction of several vehicle and railroad bridges.

The East End Connector will promote economic development in areas along the I-85 corridor toward Virginia by improving access for people and goods between Durham and counties north of the city to major employment and retail centers, Research Triangle Park, Raleigh-Durham International Airport and Wake County.

The project is also expected lower congestion on the Durham Freeway through downtown Durham. It will also help divert traffic off local roads such as U.S. 15/501, which is often used as a connection between I-85 and I-40, as well as Roxboro, Mangum, Gregson and Duke streets.

The Connector is expected to be open in 2019.

Public weighs in on Durham-Orange light-rail line route

Meadowmont residents oppose line through neighborhood

THE NEWS AND OBSERVER By Jim Wise 03/19/2015

CHAPEL HILL -- Triangle Transit held a meeting Wednesday night on the Durham-Orange Light Rail project, inviting community members to share their opinions.

Four-year-old Liam Pointer came wearing his.

Dressed in a knight's costume, Liam carried a cardboard shield with the letters C1C1A and a black slash across them.

"We have a new house. We don't want to leave!" Liam said.

The lettering referred to light-rail routes that would run through the Meadowmont neighborhood off N.C. 54 in Chapel Hill.

Liam came to the meeting with his parents, Ivy and Joey Pointer, siblings Cullum, 2, and Chandler, 6, and their neighbors Scott and Lanier Hodgson to let Triangle Transit know they wanted nothing to do with a railroad running just yards from their homes.

"I don't want my kids living that close to a train," Ivy Pointer said.

"There are five young children on our street," said Lanier Hodgson. She and her husband built "our dream home" in Meadowmont just a year ago, she said, and, like their neighbors, fear having their close community disrupted and even losing their homes to eminent domain.

"It's been incredibly distressing," she said. "The whole neighborhood is mobilizedThe Meadowmont routes, and two alternatives – "C2" and "C2A" – that bypass the neighborhood, carry the light-rail line across the Little Creek bottomlands between the Friday Center on N.C. 54 and Leigh Village on Farrington Road. Which routes to use was one of five "key decisions" on which Triangle Transit sought public input at this week's meetings in Chapel Hill and Durham.

The others are:

- Which of three alternatives to use for crossing New Hope Creek near U.S. 15-501
- Which of two locations to use for a station near Duke Medical Center and the VA Hospital in Durham
- Which of five sites to use for the rail line's maintenance shop
- Whether to build the 17-mile light rail line at all

Those decisions are part of an environmental-impact statement rail planners have to complete by February 2016 in order to apply for construction money from the Federal Transit Administration. Triangle Transit and its partner agencies in Durham and Chapel Hill hope for federal funds to cover half the estimated \$1.82 billion (inflation-adjusted for a 2020 construction start) cost to build the rail line between UNC Hospitals and Alston Avenue in East Durham.

(Descriptions of the alternatives are available on a survey form at nando.com/keys.)

People attending the meeting – a second one will be held from 4 to 7 p.m. today, March 19, at the Durham Station, at 515 W. Pettigrew St. in Durham – saw a slide show comparing the alternatives, with data on their relative costs, effects on ridership, and various impacts on surrounding areas; and a 20-minute video "flyover" that follows the route from Chapel Hill through downtown Durham nando.com/flyover.

Displays on each of the decision points and on the project in general were set up around the room with Triangle Transit staff posted to answer questions and hear what people had to say.

"It was very informative, very clear," said Jim Winders of Durham, who attended the Friday Center meeting and likes the light-rail idea. "I drive around here a lot and I'm sick and tired of the traffic.

"I don't mind paying taxes as long as they're going for something good like this," Winders said.

Winders said, though, that he's concerned about environmental damage to the bottomlands along New Hope and Little creeks. Ecologist Stephen Hall of Chapel Hill said he supports the project but was concerned that planners, in assessing the effects on natural areas and wildlife are only considering the "very narrow footprint" of the tracks themselves.

"There are a lot of secondary impacts," he said, and wants to be sure that the rail line and other development it might encourage do not create natural-area "islands" disconnected from each other.

Rosemarie Kitchin of Durham, though, said she is confident that the line will be "environmentally correct."

"Consensus will push us that way," she said.

"Overall, I'm very in favor of the project because it will direct future growth in a sensible manner," said Chris Selby of Durham. He had one particular concern about a proposed maintenance facility site on Farrington Road – that it would take out the Patterson's Mill Country Store.

"I like that country store," he said.

Triangle Transit spokesman Brad Schulz said 155 people signed in at the Friday Center meeting.

Those attending got strong encouragement to leave written opinions for planners to consider.

"It all goes into helping us," Schulz said. Evidence of public involvement in decision making is something federal officials will weigh in deciding whether to give Triangle Transit a go-ahead with its next steps to apply for federal funding.

Since early 2012, he said, Triangle Transit has held more than 260 meetings with individuals, government officials, industry organizations and the public in general to solicit feedback on light-rail plans and possibilities.

"All (comments) go into the record we will show to the Federal Transit Administration," he said. "They will get a packet with all the comments we have received.

"It will be," he said, "a fairly large packet."

North Carolina reconsiders its reliance on the gas tax

Lawmakers seek more reliable revenue sources for transportation funding

THE NEWS AND OBSERVER By Bruce Sicheloff 03/22/2015 6:51 PM

Interstate 95 travelers know that South Carolina usually has the cheapest gas and diesel fuel on the East Coast, thanks to one of the lowest motor fuel taxes in the nation.

When Elijah Johnson set out last week for Florida, he left Rocky Mount with enough gas to get out of North Carolina. He filled up for the longer trip in Dillon, S.C., at a Sunoco selling regular for \$2.069 a gallon – 25 cents below the North Carolina average that day.

"It's much cheaper here, and I'm assuming it's because the gas tax is much cheaper than North Carolina's," said Johnson, 60. "No one likes high taxes."

Legislators in Raleigh have that sentiment in mind as they haggle over how to get more money out of North Carolina's gas tax – already the sixth-highest among all states' – while trying not to say that they would increase the tax. The state collects 37.5 cents per gallon now, more than twice South Carolina's tax of 16.5 cents.

House and Senate conferees met a few times last week without resolving differences in their complicated proposals to change North Carolina's gas tax law.

Both chambers aim first to ward off a precipitous drop in the gas tax rate later this year, which would cut a few hundred million dollars from the state Department of Transportation budget. Then they'll consider whether it's time to start weaning North Carolina from its risky reliance on the anemic, old-fashioned gas tax – and find more dependable funding sources to catch up with the state's growing transportation needs.

Gas and diesel fuel consumption are expected to decline even as North Carolina adds an expected 3.5 million residents over the next 25 years. Federal automobile fuel efficiency standards will rise from 27.5 miles per gallon in

2010 to 51.3 mpg in 2025. As a result, DOT planners say, fuel tax collections could fall below \$1 billion a year after 2028 – down from \$1.9 billion this year.

A long-term fix

“It’s on us to make sure we sit down and come up with a permanent, long-term fix for transportation funding in this state,” state Rep. Charles Jeter, a Huntersville Republican, said during House floor debate on [the bill](#). “The gas tax as it is currently written will not work.”

The Senate would set the tax at a minimum 36 cents per gallon starting July 1. [Its proposal](#) also would adjust a statutory formula that makes the tax rise and fall with the ups and downs of wholesale fuel prices – which have plunged in the past six months.

This revised formula would [accelerate tax increases](#) when the price of fuel rises in future years. If the Senate proposal were current law, North Carolina drivers now would be paying a state gas tax of 46 cents.

The House starts with a similar approach, setting the minimum tax at 36 cents through the end of December. But after that, the House would revert to the current formula, allowing the tax to drop in January to a projected 30 cents. That would force hundreds of DOT layoffs and curtail road-building and bridge repair projects.

House leaders swear they don’t want that to happen. They’re betting that a Dec. 31 deadline would give the legislature an urgent incentive to develop new or increased taxes or fees that could give DOT a steady, growing money stream for years to come.

“We are using a source of revenue that fluctuates wildly,” Rep. Bill Brawley, a Charlotte Republican who championed the House’s 36-cent plan, said in a committee meeting. “How can we realistically say that we can build a road in three years if we have no idea how much money will be provided for transportation over that three years’ time?”

Two-thirds of NCDOT funding

Gas taxes have long been the nation’s biggest single source of money for roads and bridges, buses, and bike lanes – adding up to 66 percent of federal revenue and an average 31 percent of all state transportation revenues, according to a Pew Charitable Trusts study. But even with more drivers on the road each year, improved automobile fuel economy and the spread of plug-in cars that don’t need gas have caused tax collections to decline.

That’s an especially big problem here. North Carolina depends more heavily than most states on state and federal gas taxes, which now cover 66 percent of the \$4.7 billion DOT budget.

Many states can draw on a broader, more diverse revenue base to pay for transportation needs. That’s because they have more turnpikes that collect tolls, because they tap sales and property taxes and other sources to help pay for roads and bridges, or because they levy higher taxes on vehicle sales than North Carolina’s modest 3 percent rate.

And in most states, individual counties maintain the minor two-lane roads and pay for them with local sales and property taxes. In North Carolina, the state takes care of the county roads.

“We’re taking care of secondary roads in this state,” Rep. Bob Steinburg, an Edenton Republican, said in floor debate on the gas tax bill. “The other states are not responsible for doing that, and that is one reason our gas tax is higher.”

As gas tax collections flatline, several states have sharply increased their tax rates or changed how their gas taxes are calculated.

Even South Carolina is looking to end its cheap-gas status, with competing proposals to raise a tax that has not changed in 25 years. Gov. Nikki Haley wants to levy an extra 10 cents on every gallon, to bring South Carolina’s gas tax even with Georgia’s. A state Senate proposal would make that a 20-cent hike, to roughly match North Carolina’s gas tax.

In North Carolina, state and university researchers have warned for years that state and federal revenues are lagging behind the state's growing transportation needs. DOT planners said in 2012 that the cumulative shortfall would reach somewhere between \$34.4 billion and \$94.4 billion by 2040.

Legislators ducked the issue until this year. They noticed that a big chunk of that shortfall will hit North Carolina in July, when the statutory formula is expected to drop the state tax to about 29.6 cents a gallon.

'Stabilizing' gas taxes

Both the House and Senate plans would prevent that with a tax floor of 35 or 36 cents. The Senate plan is projected to push annual gas tax collections \$236 million to \$352 million higher than they would be otherwise, under the current law.

But while Haley and other South Carolina leaders talk bluntly about raising taxes, the consensus euphemism around Raleigh is "stabilizing revenues."

And, to nail down support from anti-tax fundamentalists in North Carolina, both House and Senate leaders propose to cut the gas tax for a few months, by a penny or two – before they raise it.

Gov. Pat McCrory was in sync with this talking-points paradox Monday when he testified before a U.S. House committee in Washington.

McCrory's budget proposal depends on \$475 million in increased gas tax revenues that will be available only if the legislature adopts the Senate plan or something similar. But when he spoke about the state's need for more transportation money, he touted the legislature's push for a short-term gas tax cut.

"I just supported an effort ... to reduce the gas tax," McCrory told the House committee, pumping his hand in a palm-down gesture to emphasize the point. "I supported an effort to stabilize the current funding source that we have now."

Senate leaders have not said whether they're willing to go beyond cutting the gas tax and then "stabilizing" it. But two House members are airing out some new ideas.

Rep. John Torbett, a Stanley Republican who oversees transportation spending for the House, wants to change the statutory formula so the gas tax no longer rises and falls with changes on the world market for petroleum. He proposes to peg the tax rate to two less volatile indicators: the consumer price index for energy cost inflation and North Carolina population growth.

"I'm looking at pulling it out of that volatility and putting it on a more sustainable path forward," Torbett said in an interview.

On top of that, he proposes to make increases in North Carolina's current transportation money sources, including motor vehicle fees and the highway use tax on car sales – enough to boost DOT spending by \$1 billion a year.

"We're going to work real hard on our roads – resurfacing and maintaining them, fixing potholes – and bring our streets up to the quality that the people I talk to expect but don't feel they're getting," Torbett said.

Jeter, the Huntersville Republican, has filed a bill to get rid of the gas tax altogether. While acknowledging "imperfections" in his new approach, Jeter proposes to replace the gas tax with a flat "infrastructure access fee" on every car and truck – pegged at \$201 per year to roughly match the lost gas tax receipts.

'Good things' cause problem

"The gas tax ... will only get worse over time," Jeter said. "We've got to come up with a different, better system. To me the idea of a flat fee is the cleanest, easiest way to do it."

While legislators work out how North Carolina will resolve its need for a more reliable source of transportation money, one House leader argues that this is a good problem to have.

"I'd like people to go out of here rejoicing because this problem is caused by three really good things," Rep. Paul Stam, an Apex Republican and the House speaker pro tem, said at a committee meeting.

He spelled out three reasons why gas taxes are no longer a dependable, lucrative source of transportation money.

"Much lower gas prices – is that good or bad? Good," Stam said. "Second, improved efficiency of gasoline mileage. ... And the third thing is, of course, you've got more vehicles going out there using up the roads without using gas.

"Is that a good or bad thing? Good."

TRANSPORTATION NUMBERS

Each penny of gas tax: Costs the average driver \$7.50 a year and generates \$50 million a year for the state Department of Transportation.

Less gas per mile: Federal minimum standards for automobile fuel economy will increase from 27.5 miles per gallon in 2010 to 51.3 mpg in 2025.

More people on the road: North Carolina, now with an estimated 9.9 million residents, is expected to grow to 13.5 million by 2040.

Gas tax collections declining: Yearly fuel tax receipts could fall below \$1 billion after 2028, down from \$1.9 billion this year.

Per capita DOT spending: North Carolina spent \$365 per capita on transportation improvements in 2010. At current tax rates and with the projected population growth, that number is expected to fall to \$120 per capita in 2040.

Per capita transportation taxes: Adding up gas and car taxes, DMV fees, tolls, and sales and property taxes that support state and local government spending, North Carolinians pay \$510 per person for transportation each year. The United States average: \$657 per person.

The current gas tax formula: North Carolina's gas tax is the higher of two numbers: Either 21 cents or 17.5 cents plus 7 percent of the average wholesale fuel price.

The Senate's proposed gas tax formula: Either 35 cents or 17.5 cents plus 9.9 percent of the wholesale fuel price.

Sources: NCDOT, NCSU Institute for Transportation Research and Education, NC Go

OTHER WAYS TO PAY FOR IT

With gas tax collections waning, North Carolina leaders have options for raising more transportation money. Here are a few of them.

Highway use tax on car sales: Car buyers pay a 3 percent tax on the sales price, lower than some of North Carolina's neighbors. Raising this tax to the state's general sales tax rate, 4.75 percent, would generate \$297 million a year.

Highway use tax on short-term vehicle leases: This revenue now goes to the General Fund, where it's used for non-transportation purposes. Moving it to the Highway Fund would give DOT \$50 million a year.

Transfers to General Fund: A share of gas taxes and other transportation revenues is shifted from the Highway Fund to the General Fund. Ending the transfer would give DOT an extra \$255 million a year.

Heavy truck fees: The federal government and several states tax heavy trucks by weight and annual mileage. In Oregon, this weight-mile tax generates \$300 million a year.

Vehicle-miles-traveled fees: There are different opinions about whether states can effectively tax drivers by the mile without invading their privacy. A pilot program in Oregon this year will collect 1.5 cents per mile from 5,000 drivers. If all North Carolina drivers paid that rate, DOT would collect \$1.4 billion.

Sources: NCDOT, NCSU Institute for Transportation Research and Education

Read more here: <http://www.newsobserver.com/news/politics-government/state-politics/article15617993.html#storylink=cpy>

DATA buses get new name: GoDurham

The Herald-Sun From Staff Reports Mar. 25, 2015 @ 05:11 PM



A newly branded 'GoDurham' bus is pictured at Durham Station Wednesday. The Herald-Sun | Alex Tricoli

RALEIGH —GoTransit, a new family comprising bus services formerly known as DATA (Durham), CAT (Raleigh) and Triangle Transit (Triangle-wide), unveiled its new GoDurham bus Wednesday, and will be gradually switching over its entire fleet to the names GoDurham, GoRaleigh and GoTriangle.

Local vendors donated the supplies necessary to make the change, including blue seats emblazoned with "GoDurham."

Sean Smith, general manager for GoTransit, said that the process to outfit the remaining buses with the new look will take about two years and that the outfitting costs about \$7,000 per vehicle.

The N.C. Department of Transportation assisted with funds for the rebranding project.

"More and more, the Triangle lives, works and plays as a region," Durham Mayor and GoTransit Board Chairman Bill Bell said at a news conference announcing the changes Wednesday in Raleigh. "This new exciting transit brand, while maintaining what makes us unique as individual cities and agencies, also reflects our vision for transit to be the link that grows our businesses as well as improves the quality of life for residents throughout the Triangle."

"Today's launch is another important step in our mission to provide a well-connected multimodal transportation system that meets the growing needs of our state," says Transportation Secretary Tony Tata. "Partnerships like this are essential to helping us better connect people to jobs, education, healthcare and recreation centers, and ensuring continued quality of life for all our communities."

Cary's C-Tran system will become GoCary in 2016. Chapel Hill Transit will decide at a later date whether or not to change its name to GoChapel Hill.

Sidewalk project runs into roadblocks

The Herald-Sun By Ray Gronberg Mar. 24, 2015 @ 08:03 PM

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DURHAM —Some residents of west Durham aren't happy that County Commissioners seem reluctant to offer financial backing to a sidewalk project that would link their neighborhood to Forest View Elementary School.

The walkway, and a traffic signal, would make it easier for children and adults to cross Erwin Road at its intersection with Randolph Road.

N.C. Department of Transportation officials are willing to put it in, provided that the county agrees to take responsibility for its future maintenance. And to the consternation of the project's advocates, therein lies the rub.

"We're not talking about [the county] providing sidewalks, all we're talking about is the requirement to maintain the sidewalk, which is a significantly lower expenditure," said Chad Meadows, a resident of the Solterra neighborhood off Randolph.

The problem, as county officials see it, is that a relatively small-dollar commitment in this case could set a precedent that could come back to bite their government in a big way, given local trends and some of the things happening in state government.

Agreeing to the maintenance of even the 170-foot section of sidewalk involved "would represent a new kind of financial liability Durham County has never before taken on," Assistant County Manager Drew Cummings told commissioners recently.

The county's a player because the Durham city limits around the Erwin/Randolph intersection end, with a very key exception, mostly on the southeast side of Erwin Road.

The exception is that when Forest View Elementary was built, the land it's on also became part of the city, as a sort of "satellite" that's separated from other city-annexed land.

That means the proposed sidewalk, short as it is, has to cross land that's in the county's jurisdiction in the course of linking the school to existing walkways along Randolph.

And as Cummings noted, Durham County, like most of its counterparts around the state, generally hasn't been involved in sidewalk or road construction.

Road construction in rural areas is the state's job, via DOT, and sidewalks are generally regarded as a city amenity.

Before 2011, it would have been possible for the city to step in by annexing the intervening property and building the sidewalk, even if the land's owners had objected. But the N.C. General Assembly that year repealed the "involuntary annexation" powers of cities. Now, cities can take jurisdiction over land only if its owners ask them to.

In practical terms, annexation now comes only when a developer wants city services like water and sewer hookups. And that sort of petition isn't likely in this case.

With the city government thus out of the picture, Meadows and the other neighbors have to turn to the county.

But even there, attitudes at the state level give local leaders reason to pause.

Over the years, DOT has made no secret of the fact it'd like to unload rural-road maintenance onto the counties. That's had little appeal to county governments that already have more things on their to-do lists than money to pay for them.

And an assortment of bills pending in the 2015 session of the General Assembly hints that there might be even less money in county coffers, at least in places like Durham.

Legislators are talking about tinkering with property- and sales-tax rules to favor the development industry and rural counties, respectively. If those bills go through, millions of dollars of expected future revenue will never reach the local treasury.

But the high-level politics are of little interest to residents who just want the sidewalk built.

"Because of heavy and high-speed traffic, it is impossible for kids to walk to [Forest View] school on their own, and extremely dangerous even with adult accompaniment," said Maggie Thacker, another Solterra resident.