

## **NCDOT leader says fiscal crisis will ease soon, but some say bailout is still needed**

The Herald-Sun By Richard Stradling November 6, 2019

RALEIGH – The N.C. Department of Transportation will begin to emerge from its financial troubles early next year without an additional infusion of cash from the General Assembly, according to Secretary of Transportation Jim Trogdon.

Trogdon says that by May NCDOT will be able to resume pre-construction engineering work on about half of the 900 projects the department put on hold late this summer to save money. In an interview, Trogdon also said despite the delays, he thinks all 900 projects will eventually be done on the timetable set in the state's 10-year construction plan.

"I want to have those stay on their scheduled delivery for construction," he said.

But the suspension of pre-construction planning continues to hurt engineering firms that the department will need when work resumes, some of which have furloughed or laid off employees. To help those firms get through the coming months, the General Assembly may yet provide a special appropriation or loan to resume more of the 900 projects sooner, according to Jim Smith, executive director of the [American Council of Engineering Companies of North Carolina](#).

"The leadership of both houses as well as many legislators agree that there is a critical need and something must be done," Smith wrote in a message to the group's members. "What form that takes remains to be seen."

NCDOT leaders have blamed the department's budget crisis on two forces: the weather and the costs of settling lawsuits related to the Map Act, a 30-year-old law that was found unconstitutional.

NCDOT has paid \$366 million to landowners who were deprived of the full use of their property by the law, which allowed the state to reserve land for highways without buying it. NCDOT officials have said the total cost to settle the Map Act suits could top \$1 billion, including the cost of acquiring the property, damages and legal fees.

Meanwhile, NCDOT says storms, including two major hurricanes, have cost NCDOT an average of \$222 million a year for cleanup and repairs since 2016, compared to an average of \$66 million a year over the previous decade. Hurricane Florence last fall and other snow and rain storms since then quickly depleted the department's operations and maintenance budget in the most recent fiscal year.

Trogdon says he'd like to see the General Assembly create a mechanism for dealing with weather-related costs. Options include creating a reserve fund for weather cleanup and repairs or making special appropriations at the end of each year, he said, adding that he doesn't have a preference.

"We just want to work with the House and the Senate to find a workable solution," he said. "If we continue to see storms at this intensity and frequency, the old system just doesn't work anymore."

### **TROGDON ANSWERS CRITICISM**

Some in state government have criticized NCDOT's handling of its finances. In September, a report commissioned by the Office of State Budget and Management concluded that NCDOT's 14 geographic divisions had all overspent their budget allocations in the fiscal year ending June 30, most by at least \$20 million, in part because of a lack of central oversight.

In addition, Senate President Phil Berger and State Treasurer Dale Folwell have both publicly questioned why NCDOT did not better anticipate the Map Act expenses and continued to accelerate spending on road projects to reduce a surplus of cash that had topped \$2 billion. Folwell was especially critical, calling on Gov. Roy Cooper to replace Trogdon and have NCDOT's finances taken over by the Office of State Budget and Management.

“The NCDOT didn’t know it was speeding,” Folwell said last week. “When it was told that it was speeding, it didn’t slow down and, eventually, it didn’t slow down enough.”

Trogdon answered that criticism in a letter to legislative leaders on Monday. He said NCDOT was responding to the wishes of the General Assembly as it worked to put its cash to work and that the department repeatedly explained its progress to legislators and others in recent years. By streamlining the planning process, he said, NCDOT was able to accelerate construction of major projects, including the widening of [Interstate 40 south of Raleigh](#) and the overhaul and widening of the [last four-lane section of the Raleigh Beltline](#), both of which are underway.

In the letter, Trogdon said NCDOT needs to work with legislators “to develop improved strategies for storm-related payments,” but doesn’t ask for a special appropriation this fall, as some legislators have proposed. Rep. John Torbett, a Republican who heads the House Transportation and Transportation Appropriations committees, introduced [House Bill 967](#), which would provide NCDOT with \$661 million for Map Act and storm-related expenses.

But that bill has failed to advance beyond the House Appropriations Committee, and members of both the House and Senate have talked about proposing alternatives when the General Assembly reconvenes next week. In a statement Wednesday, NCDOT would say only that it has been meeting with legislators regularly to “discuss the department’s cash balance issues.”

“We appreciate the interest by the General Assembly in developing possible solutions to the situation, and we will continue to partner with legislators moving forward,” the statement said.

#### **‘CONSULTING PURGATORY’**

Trogdon disclosed the planned resumption of pre-construction engineering work at a meeting of the American Council of Engineering Companies of North Carolina in Raleigh last week. Suzanne Young, whose [Three Oaks Engineering](#) of Durham counts NCDOT as its biggest client, said Trogdon told a ballroom full of engineers that 444 projects would be started between January and May, setting off speculation about which projects and exactly when.

“For some people, if it’s January or if it’s May, that really matters for their ability to keep staff and avoid layoffs,” Young said in an interview. “That’s five months of payroll if it’s the latter.”

Three Oaks Engineering has 29 employees in North Carolina, and Young said she’s avoided layoffs by putting half of those people on reduced hours and by picking up small jobs for municipalities and private developers. She described the situation with NCDOT as “transportation consulting purgatory,” and says everyone in her industry is eager to get back to work on highway projects.

“NCDOT has been great to us, so much work. They are by far our largest client,” Young said. “This is the first time we’ve been in any kind of position like this.”

## **Fix a bike, get a bike: Durham co-op wants bikes for everyone**

WRAL.com By Jeff Hogan, anchor/reporter, and Rick Armstrong, producer October 29, 2019

DURHAM, N.C. — A nonprofit called the Durham Bike Co-op serves the community by repairing old bikes.

The shop, located at 1612 Acadia St. between Durham’s Duke Park and Interstate 85, is where old bikes go to be resurrected. Even if a whole bike can’t be saved, valuable parts can be transplanted.

Durham Bike Co-op volunteers Matthew Yearout and Rob Walpole aren’t deterred by rust or ruined rims.

"We recycle everything," Walpole said. "We put very little in the landfill."

The shop is community owned and run entirely by volunteers.

Some of the bikes that are dropped off only need minor repairs -- like work on a flat tire. Others are donated by community members who no longer ride.

"After it sits in their garage for four or five years, they decide to donate it, and we are often the ones who get it," Walpole said.

For \$30 or three hours of volunteer work, people can become members, where they can have work done on their own bike or help with repairs.

The shops is also a place where people in need of cheap transportation can own their bike. "Bicycles can be very important to folks who don't have cars and who need to get places like work," Walpole said.

"Generally speaking, the bikes are \$20, or an hour volunteered plus \$10," Yearout added.

With more greenway trails now connecting cities like Durham and Raleigh, bike benefits are bountiful.

"Some people do it for health reasons, and some people do it for an environmental reason," Yearour said. "I personally try to commute to work every day."

The Durham Bike Co-op will not run out of bikes to fix anytime soon, but donations are still welcome.

The shop mainly operates on Thursday evenings and Sundays. For more information about donating, volunteering or obtaining a bike, visit their website.

## **End of an era? Durham's Can Opener bridge on Gregson Street will be raised next week**

The Herald-Sun By Richard Stradling October 22, 2019

DURHAM – The famed Can Opener bridge over Gregson Street may be peeling the tops off fewer trucks in the future.

The street will close Wednesday for two weeks so the N.C. Railroad can elevate the bridge eight inches. When the street reopens Nov. 5, the clearance of the bridge will have been raised from 11 feet 8 inches to a more truck-friendly 12 feet 4 inches. (CONTINUED...)

The N.C. Railroad, which owns the rail line, will use jacks to carefully lift the steel beams that carry the tracks over the street, then slide new plates between the beams and concrete piers, said Jim Kessler, the railroad's vice president of engineering. At the same time, crews from Norfolk Southern, which leases the rail line, will raise the tracks on both sides of the bridge, creating a gradual eight-inch change in grade.

The whole process is scheduled to take place over an eight-hour period next Tuesday, forcing the cancellation of some mid-day Amtrak trains, Kessler said. He said he's not worried that jacking up a 90-year-old bridge will somehow damage it.

"That's all been looked at by the engineers," he said. "There should be no surprises."

The railroad bridge opened in the mid-1920s, when trucks were not so tall. It has been enforcing a height limit on Gregson Street by shearing off the tops of trucks for decades. The collisions became so common that a steel crash beam was installed in front of the bridge to take the force of the impact.

Curious about how often trucks hit the bridge outside his office in Brightleaf Square, Jürgen Henn set up cameras in 2008 to record crashes and began posting the videos on his website, 11foot8.com. The site contains videos of 147 truck-bridge collisions, the most recent on June 18 when the bucket on a tree-trimming truck got clipped.

Henn used to say that a truck hit the bridge about once a month on average. Then three years ago, the N.C. Department of Transportation installed a traffic signal at Gregson and Peabody streets, just before the bridge, that turns red when a truck that's too high trips a laser beam across the street. An LED message next to the red light reads "Overheight Must Turn," warning the driver before the light turns green.

The warning has helped, but doesn't prevent inattentive drivers or those racing to get through the red light from getting jolted. Henn's website includes videos of seven bridge strikes this year.

The warning system will remain, said NCDOT spokesman Marty Homan. NCDOT will adjust the height of the laser beam and install new warning signs to reflect the new clearance of the bridge, Homan said.

While higher, a 12-foot 4-inch bridge is still relatively low. Bridges built by NCDOT today have clearances of at least 16 feet on interstate highways and 14 to 16 feet on other roads, Homan said.

Kessler said eight inches was as much as the railroad could raise the bridge without having to make expensive changes to the platforms in the Amtrak station just down the tracks.

"We're trying to make it better," he said. "We're doing as much as we can on our end to get it up without it being a huge, huge project that's disruptive for the city."

The railroad is paying the \$500,000 cost of the project. Before the road reopens in November, the steel beams of the bridge will be repainted gray and the piers a cream color, similar to what the railroad recently did with the nearby Chapel Hill Street trestle.

While truck drivers will welcome the higher bridge, some Durham residents and followers of 11foot8.com will miss the old Can Opener. When the city posted a tweet about the upcoming closure and the reason for it, many people reacted with alarm and regret.

"Gonna miss those unboxing videos," one wrote. "I find this news to be heartbreaking," wrote another.