

6 lanes proposed for I-40 stretch

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There are new efforts this fall to get the state moving on Wake County's top road improvement priority: widening Interstate 40 between Wade Avenue in West Raleigh and U.S. 1/64 in Cary.

The state Department of Transportation figures it would cost about \$60 million to make this four-lane stretch a full eight lanes wide. With highway finances tight these days, that's a lot of money.

So local government and business leaders are pushing for a more thrifty approach: Make it just six lanes for now, and save about \$30 million.

"It may need eight lanes at some point, but it certainly needs more than the four lanes it has now," said Joe Milazzo II, executive director of the Regional Transportation Alliance, a business advocacy group. "And \$30 million's cheaper than \$60 million."

Each day as many as 106,000 cars and trucks squeeze through the four-mile bottleneck. The Triangle's worst rush-hour jams happen on that stretch.

According to a rough estimate offered by Milazzo's group and checked by DOT engineers, it would cost \$28.7 million to add two more lanes on the wide, green median -- making it six lanes, three each way.

The cost rises to \$31 million if the new six-lane freeway is equipped with bridges wide enough for eight lanes. That step would cut costs on the inevitable expansion in the future.

Last week, the local transportation planning board endorsed the half-price version. The Capital Area Metropolitan Planning Organization sent its road improvement priorities to DOT, with a six-lane I-40 widening at the top of the list.

The state Board of Transportation will consider local requests this winter as it makes highway plans for 2009 to 2015.

The reduced price tag should make it easier to get a state commitment to start widening I-40 -- if DOT engineers agree that six lanes now is smarter than eight lanes in an uncertain future.

The bus difference

Next time you pass a bus on your way to work, or a bus passes you in your car, say a little "thank you" for the bus riders who make your rush hour a little easier.

The new annual Texas Transportation Institute Urban Mobility Report, published last week, puts fresh numbers on the hours and dollars we waste in traffic jams each year. And it calculates how much worse our daily traffic backups would be if we didn't have public transportation.

You might guess that there aren't enough Triangle bus riders to make a big difference, and you'd be right. Our spread-out suburban commuting pattern and our so-so public transportation system make the bus a small but growing part of rush-hour travel.

But rush hour is the time of day that transit use -- even in the Triangle -- can make a difference.

In 2005, the most recent year calculated in the Texas report, Triangle commuters wasted 18 million hours and \$346 million in time and gas costs while they were stuck in rush-hour congestion.

If the commuters who took the bus had all driven their cars instead, our traffic jams would have been a little worse. We would have lost an additional 742,000 hours and \$14.1 million in congestion delays.

That's not a lot, only about 4 percent. Bus riders reduced our rush-hour delay by about one hour per person over the whole year.

But look at the difference transit use makes in other cities. As Triangle leaders rethink our long-range goals for rail and bus transit projects, the Texas report gives us something to shoot for.

Most big cities have better transit networks than ours, with more commuters on buses and trains.

In the nation's 85 largest urban areas, public transit use in 2005 took enough rush-hour cars off the freeways to reduce overall delays by 14 percent -- a time savings of six hours for every commuter that year.

Find the Texas Transportation Institute report online at mobility.tamu.edu/ums/.

Smoothing Wade

Winston Liao, who commutes from Chapel Hill to Raleigh, wonders about this summer's bumpy patchwork repairs on the western end of Wade Avenue. When will the work be finished?

In the next week or so, says Reid Elmore, DOT's Wake County maintenance engineer.

Extensive "alligator" cracks in the pavement have been patched, and the top layer has been gouged out where Wade passes beneath bridges -- so there will still be enough overhead clearance when a new layer of asphalt gets laid atop the old.

The final paving is scheduled at night between 7 p.m. and 6 a.m., one lane at a time, along two miles of Wade between Edwards Mill Road and Faircloth Street. The work was tentatively scheduled to start Monday night, Elmore said, and should take about seven days.