

60 mph legal on Wade extension Faster limit reflects current driving habits

February 16, 2012

By: Bruce Siceloff

RALEIGH After a study confirmed that most drivers go 65 mph - safely - on the busy Wade Avenue Extension in West Raleigh, the state Department of Transportation raised the speed limit there from 55 mph to 60 mph.

That will be happy news for many of the 60,000 drivers who zoom back and forth on the four-lane expressway each day. Wade is a key link to Interstate 40 for Raleigh residents who work in Cary, Research Triangle Park and farther west, and for out-of-towners who work in Raleigh.

"No one ever drives 55 down that section of Wade Avenue unless there's a patrol officer out there," said Brandon Williamson, 28, of Raleigh. "There are other places where it's unsafe to speed, but that's a wide-open freeway."

The new speed limit was posted late last week. For inbound Wade drivers who exit from I-40, the 60 mph limit covers a little more than two miles. The top speed drops to 45 mph just before drivers hit the first Wade Avenue traffic signal at the I-440 Beltline, and then to 35 mph after the signal at Ridge Road.

The change was sought by the Regional Transportation Alliance, a business advocacy group. Later this year, DOT engineers will take a look at the group's request to consider allowing speeds up to 70 mph on several Triangle freeways where 65 mph is the limit now:

U.S. 1 for 35 miles from Sanford to Walnut Street in Cary.

I-40 for 12 miles from Aviation Parkway to Lake Wheeler Road.

N.C. 147 from the future East End Connector in East Durham past I-40 and through RTP to the 540 Outer Loop, plus the section of I-40 that connects N.C. 147 to 540, about 9 miles.

The entire 540 Outer Loop, about 30 miles.

"We're asking the question," said Joe Milazzo II, executive director of the Regional Transportation Alliance. "Would this more accurately reflect the way people travel? Would they be able to do it safely?"

Kelly L. Becker, a DOT regional traffic engineer, said a study of the Wade Avenue Extension pegged the prevailing traffic speed at 65 mph. The road is wide and mostly straight, without parked cars or pedestrians, and its history indicates a low risk of speed-related crashes.

"Our goal is to try to set reasonable speed limits," Becker said. Although some drivers believe otherwise, she said, studies have shown that setting the speed limit higher will not prompt drivers to go faster.

"Raising or lowering the speed limit doesn't really affect behaviors. Sometimes you don't even realize what the speed limit is, and you're just driving what you feel comfortable driving. So we're trying to get closer to that," Becker said.

When traffic engineers look at the other freeways on Milazzo's wish list, they'll consider factors such as driving habits, road conditions and crash trends.

"Just because most traffic is traveling at 75 mph doesn't mean we're going to post the speed limit at 70," Becker said.

Williamson is a frequent flier on the Wade Avenue Extension. He was stopped for driving too fast there once and got off with a warning. His mother-in-law wasn't so lucky - she got a speeding ticket on Wade.

"Too bad all the people who received tickets while driving safely will not get a refund," Williamson said.