

# The Herald-Sun

## DOT ranks East End Connector as top project

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DURHAM -- The proposed East End Connector, a link between the Durham Freeway and U.S. 70, offers high enough benefits and low enough costs that it merits full funding and a place on the N.C. Department of Transportation's short-term construction schedule, state engineers say.

In fact, the Durham connector appears at No. 6 in the entire state in a new ranking of roads eligible for money legislators and DOT has reserved for loops and other urban bypasses.

That actually understates how well the East End project fared in the ranking, because the top two slots went to projects here and in Gaston County that either are nowhere close to being construction-ready or are likely to be built as toll roads.

Local officials were pleased by the news, which because of a public-records request from a newspaper in Winston-Salem came out about a week ahead of when DOT had planned to release it.

If they hold, the current rankings would put DOT on track to break ground on the East End Connector in fall 2013, city Transportation Director Mark Ahrendsen said.

Given how long things normally take in the road-construction arena, that "is very good news," Ahrendsen said. "In transportation time, three years to break ground is pretty quick."

DOT engineers used the ranking to assemble a list of basically six projects they think they can start building by fiscal 2019-20.

Segments of the Interstate 295 loop around Fayetteville are first up, with construction set to begin on some during the current fiscal year.

The East End Connector and a 6.4-mile segment of the Interstate 485 loop in Charlotte would follow, with construction on both proposed to start in fiscal 2013-14.

Projects in the Wilmington, Greensboro and Greenville areas would follow. DOT also would like to start land acquisition for a second project in Wilmington in fiscal 2019-20.

The state Board of Transportation still has agree to the proposed schedule and roll it into the next edition of DOT's construction program. It likely will vote on that in June.

DOT spokeswoman Greer Beaty said the main factor influencing the proposed schedule is money, coupled with Gov. Beverly Perdue's prodding of the agency to deliver more projects on time and within budget.

The agency figures on having only about \$150 million in loop-earmarked construction funding to work with each year, which is not enough over a decade to address some \$8 billion in identified loop projects, she said.

Engineers and planners assume the state will pay cash for the new roads, rather than borrowing money for a larger construction program and applying the annual \$150 million to future debt payments, she said.

Past earmarks for the East End Connector and a promise by local officials to defray some costs using federal highway subsidies they control have DOT thinking it needs to allot nearly \$154 million to round out the project's funding.

Engineers have estimated the link between the Freeway and U.S. 70 will cost roughly \$174 million.

DOT planners scored all proposed loop projects in the state using a new scheme that gives points for factors like predicted travel-time savings, their potential to spark economic development, their freight-handling potential and overall likely traffic volume.

They spent months developing the points system, along the way consulting local-level planners here and in other regions who were happy to see DOT spell out in advance the metrics it intended to use.

Ahrendsen said planners here in the Durham-Chapel Hill area joined others in turning in suggested changes to the points system, and had been pleased to see DOT embrace most of them.

DOT then took a project's total points and divided it by the estimate costs for it the agency would have to shoulder.

That last step appeared to badly hurt the single-most expensive project proposed for the loop program, a 16.8-mile link between Interstate 40 and U.S. 52 east and north of Winston-Salem that DOT would need another \$834 million to build.

Engineers ranked that project dead last, to howls of complaint from its advocates in Winston-Salem. The paper that pried the draft rankings out of the agency, the Winston-Salem Journal, reported that business leaders there were criticizing DOT for changing its approach to loop projects.

"We have been waiting longer for our beltway than any other community," the Journal quoted Greater Winston-Salem Chamber of Commerce President Gayle Anderson as saying.

That brought some figurative coughs of disagreement from Durham officials, who noted that the East End Connector has figured in local road planning since the 1960s.

"I don't think they've been waiting 50 years," Ahrendsen said, noting that the schedule for both cities' projects had slipped when earlier versions of them encountered citizen opposition.

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