

## East End Connector gets a regional branding push -- as it faces a new hurdle

December 11, 2009

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If you're looking for a lesson in branding, you could do a lot worse than the Regional Transportation Alliance's new campaign to push for the East End Connector.



Wait, make that the Triangle Connector, [as we learn from WRAL's reporting](#):

The Regional Transportation Alliance has a new top freeway priority in the Triangle for 2010 that would reduce travel time from Interstate 85 to Research Triangle Park.

The Triangle Connector to Interstate 85 would be the final piece of roadway that would create a stoplight-free connection from U.S. Highway 1 in southwest Wake County to I-85 in Research Triangle Park....

"It will allow the Triangle region as a whole – Raleigh, Cary, Chapel Hill, Research Triangle Park – to connect to Interstate 85," Joe Milazzo, executive director of the Regional Transportation Alliance, said.

What's in a name? Well, regional support, for one thing; the repositioning helps to show the road as a facility that doesn't just matter for Durham, but for the entire Triangle and beyond.

Less-reported but omnipresent in discussions these days of the East End Connector is why that matters.

Although the highway got support and funding from the Board of Transportation a few years back, even making it onto the draft Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) document that drives road priorities.

But all of that faces a data-driven analytical test in the halls of the NCDOT in 2010, as the department tries to unwind its old reputation for politically-driven decisions on what roads get built where with a new prioritization process.

It's ironic: for twenty years, Durham stands by as other communities take their first crack at Urban Loop dollars. And just when the BOT finally (with the help of Ken Spaulding) allocates funding to the project, NCDOT begins to unwind the admittedly-troubled way it makes decisions.

All of which makes the regional positioning more important than ever.

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As important as the East End Connector is for improving the connectivity of RTP per se, and for providing support to urban Durham neighborhoods while speeding North Durham commute times -- from a regional perspective, it provides a major freeway connection straight from US 1 and the Sandhills to I-85 and points north.

The RTA's announcement at a luncheon this week that the EEC would be the top priority for the business transportation lobbying organization is good news.

And it comes on the heel of the most recent TIP document, which actually accelerated the construction date of the EEC by a fiscal year -- a nice change after what happened [here in late 2007](#), when it got unceremoniously booted two years' back with a delayed construction start date, from FY2012 to FY2014, in the last TIP.

The most recent draft TIP accelerates the project from FY2014 to FY2013; not quite a make-up for the previous delay, but still nice to see amidst a tough economy. And it's more impressive when you consider that the old TIP projected a \$99m cost for the road, all funded through FY14; the new plan sees a greater project cost (\$161.7m) but finds funding for all but \$33m through FY15.

This year and next see almost \$14m committed to right of way acquisition (currently underway) and another \$5.6m for utility work. Mitigation work would proceed in FY2012, followed by the first part of several years' worth of construction. (Of course, the TIP routinely has as much as twice as many projects it does funding, so it's best not to get hopes too high until dollars are actually there.)

But while that prioritization and funding appear on the TIP, reflecting the planning and priorities of NCDOT's usual methods, the TIP placement doesn't mean the EEC is full steam ahead.

The biggest wrinkle: a new strategic prioritization process for road projects known as SPOT, which will for the first time provide a more data-centric approach to centrally select project and investment priorities -- as opposed to the long-standing politicized process that gave the state's Board of Transportation a significant role.

TIP priorities, driven generally by regional MPOs in urban areas and their counterparts in more rural ones, have traditionally set much of the agenda for project prioritization.

But the SPOT process, which will run through the first half of 2010, will play a significant role in prioritizing this time around.

In an interview earlier this fall, District 5 BOT rep (and past BCR guest columnist) Chuck Watts noted that the new, data-driven process would impact the East End Connector, which hadn't made the last 60-month "let list" for projects under the old methodology.

The omission of the EEC from the "let list" -- its old November 2014 start date fell just outside the window -- meant that its funding will have to work its way through NCDOT's lens of analysis before it gets finalized.

"There's going to be a strong effort to try to keep it where it is," Watts said. "This one has strong data to support it."

City of Durham transportation director Mark Ahrendsen confirmed in a discussion and email on Thursday that while the project appears on the current version of the TIP planning document, the version being prepared by the agency next year will use the SPOT effort to prioritize Urban Loop dollars and figure out which projects should be built.

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Watts echoed the sentiment that the East End Connector was a long time in coming.

"I think a lot of people in Durham feel like in the twenty years of having loop money, having no dollars spent in Durham County is problematic," Watts said -- though he went on to note that the lack of consensus on just where to spend the dollars, what with a decade-plus-long fight over the doomed Eno Drive proposal, hurt Durham's chances.

"We're talking about national and state money being spent, and we were somewhat unsure about what we wanted done, and other communities were more galvanized, more unified about what they wanted done," Watts said.

But he also echoed the point the Regional Transportation Alliance is making: namely, that the EEC isn't a road uniquely suited for the Bull City, but one that would serve a wide regional need.

"You'd be able to go from north of Durham down to almost Pinehurst at highway speeds without having to go on back roads," Watts said. "The term East End Connector describes it from a Durham-only perspective. It's really more of a Triangle expressway that would help to promote a loop all around the Triangle, not just Raleigh and Durham."

The bottom line?

Keep on keeping on with that regional perspective, RTA.

Because the EEC's chances seem best when we think of this project as part of a Triangle-wide vision.

<http://www.bullcityrising.com/2009/12/eec-gets-regional-branding-push-next-major-hurdle.html>