

East End Connector gets green light

Durham project set for 2013-14

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By Bruce Siceloff

The state Department of Transportation expects to start construction in 2013-14 on Durham's East End Connector, one of North Carolina's longest-delayed road projects.

First proposed in the 1970s, the \$162 million project would create a north-south, stoplight-free drive between Interstate 85 and Research Triangle Park. It would upgrade part of U.S. 70 into a freeway and build a link between it and the Durham Freeway.

The 2014 start date shows up in a new draft schedule for DOT urban loop projects across the state. Groundbreaking had been set for fiscal year 2013 in a schedule published two years ago, although DOT officials later said delays were likely because of limited funds.

Following up on Gov. Bev Perdue's pledge to remove politics from the state's decision process for road construction, DOT is publishing a new set of criteria it will use to set priorities for urban loops.

The state Board of Transportation will receive a draft of the criteria next week, with the final list to be adopted in 2011 after more than a year of review and public comment across the state.

Projects are being rated on such factors as how much traffic they will serve and how much travel time they will save, compared against project costs.

The East End Connector ranked sixth among 21 loop projects evaluated across the state in the new rating system. But it was one of only seven projects with construction tentatively scheduled to start in the next 10 years. That's all the state can afford.

"If we were going to build all the loops today, it would cost us \$8 billion," said Greer Beaty, DOT spokeswoman. "But this year we have only \$150 million in loop money to spend, so we don't even come close to having enough."

Fiscal years run from July 1 to June 30. Other start dates are fiscal 2011 for I-295 in Fayetteville, 2013 for an I-40 and US 17 project in Wilmington, 2014 for an I-485 widening in Charlotte, 2014 and 2017 for the next sections of Greensboro's loop, and 2020 for Greenville's Southwest Bypass.

"This is a realistic schedule," Beaty said.

501 bypass needs work

Another Durham project ranks higher than the East End Connector under the new loop criteria - a bypass for U.S. 501 on the city's north side - but much more environmental and design work will be needed before it can be put on the construction schedule, Beaty said.

Two projects to complete Raleigh's 540 Outer Loop are included on DOT's evaluation list, but they are not listed on the construction schedule because their fates will be determined separately as toll projects. The Southern Wake Freeway is ranked seventh, and the Eastern Wake Freeway is ranked 13th.

The Triangle Expressway, which includes the western part of the 540 Loop, is under construction and will open as the state's first modern toll road in 2011 and 2012.