

The Herald-Sun

Proposed East End Connector on track

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By: Ray Gronberg

DURHAM -- Engineers from the N.C. Department of Transportation say their lengthy review of the environmental impact of the proposed East End Connector hasn't turned up any showstoppers that would block the project's construction.

The preferred route of \$174 million link between the Durham Freeway and U.S. 70 would displace 17 homes and nine businesses. In return, it would ease future congestion on central Durham's major north-south surface streets, DOT officials said in the report.

The structures that need to be purchased are in a predominantly black part of the city, but as it happens only six of the homes and three of the businesses are minority-owned, the report said.

DOT will have to compensate the city for taking less than a tenth of an acre of the C.R. Wood Park, which lies between Commonwealth Street and Rowena Avenue adjacent to the connector's route.

The agency has promised to make good by paving the park's tennis courts or parking lot.

Road builders will also need to erect a 1,082-foot-long wall along the freeway where it crosses Rowena Avenue, to cut down on the noise residents of the area will hear.

Durham's Transportation Department received the report last week, and will soon help DOT officials brief the City Council on its contents.

Administrators also have to draft comments on the report for DOT, incorporating the results of an as-yet-unscheduled, state-organized public hearing on the project, city Transportation Director Mark Ahrendsen said.

The hope is that officials on both sides can complete before year's end the work that goes into the issuance of a formal "finding of no significant impact" allowing the road's construction, he said.

Elected officials and business leaders, meanwhile, are trying to line up the remaining funds necessary for the project. A delegation from Durham and Raleigh met late last week with state Transportation Secretary Gene Conti to lobby for it.

The group included Mayor Bill Bell, City Councilman Mike Woodard, Greater Durham Chamber of Commerce board member Bill Brian and two leaders of a Triangle-wide advocacy group, the Regional Transportation Alliance.

Conti brought to the meeting two of top aides, DOT Chief Operating Officer Jim Trogdon and Chief Financial Officer Mark Foster, Woodard said.

The secretary said he's "very supportive" of the project and recognizes the need for it will only grow, but he stressed that the launch decision will come down to a matter of funding. Foster followed up by saying DOT is "looking for partnerships in this," Woodard said.

Local officials responded by saying they're willing to back up their requests with a share of their area's federal highway aid, Woodard said.

They also pointed out that the project now enjoys regional support. Thanks to help from the Regional Transportation Alliance and its executive director, Joe Milazzo, Raleigh Mayor Charles Meeker has gotten behind the project.

Meeker came to last week's meeting "and just said this is important to the region, this is important to Raleigh [and] we need to have this," Woodard said.

Local officials are expecting DOT to fund the bulk of the connector from the reserve the state set up to pay for loop roads around North Carolina's major cities.

DOT has earmarked money for the connector in the past, but additional allocations likely will ride on how well the project scores in a new ranking system engineers are creating to judge which of the state's as-yet-unbuilt loops merit top priority.

Ahrendsen said local leaders have supported the effort to set up a scoring system, and think the screening criteria DOT is honing in on are "reasonable."

They also think, based on their analysis of the criteria, that the East End Connector "would score well," he said.

But Ahrendsen conceded local planners haven't tried to rate it against similar projects elsewhere. "We don't know how this one would compare to other loop projects," he said.

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