

## Turnpikes would get us moving again

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As anyone driving through the Research Triangle can attest, whether we like it or not, we're already paying a toll -- a "congestion toll" -- to get from here to there. Unless we take action, congestion will take an increasing toll on Triangle travelers in the years ahead.

The Regional Transportation Alliance -- the regional business leadership group that focuses on relieving traffic congestion and enhancing mobility -- supports the accelerated completion of Interstate 540 and Triangle Parkway. These critical stoplight-free roadways are years behind schedule, and they stand decades from completion under current funding scenarios.

Construction estimates for the Western Wake Freeway [the western section of the I-540 Outer Loop] have doubled to more than a half-billion dollars. With N.C. Highway Trust Fund loop funds largely depleted, the resources to complete I-540 and loops in nine other cities are simply not available, and increases in state dollars are unlikely. Triangle Parkway, which has languished on transportation plans for a half century, is currently ineligible for loop funding. Tolls are being considered for Triangle Parkway and the western and southern sections of I-540 because there are no other viable funding alternatives.

Turnpike authorities in Austin, Orlando, Fla., Greenville, S.C., Dallas and other fast-growing regions are investing billions of dollars in modern toll roads to provide alternatives to gridlock. The N.C. Turnpike Authority study currently under way will help determine if tolls can accelerate freeway construction here. If the Western Wake Freeway and Triangle Parkway were built as toll roads, existing parallel roads would remain as nontoll options, just as they are today.

Today, our region is paying a "congestion toll" and getting nothing in return. We owe it to families and businesses in southern Durham and southwestern Wake counties -- and surrounding areas -- to carefully consider a "user pays" funding mechanism that could help speed construction of these desperately needed freeways by 10 to 20 years.