

# Beltway action seems unlikely

By Wesley Young | Journal Reporter

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Forsyth County commissioners appear unlikely to tackle a resolution supporting the eastern leg of the Northern Beltway anytime soon, despite a recent request for backing from the Greater Winston-Salem Chamber of Commerce.

Chamber officials said yesterday that they need more time to provide commissioners with information about the importance of the project and the price of delay.

"We are saying this is an important conversation to be having for Forsyth County and its future," said Jake Cashion, the chamber's director of government affairs.

When Cashion brought a draft resolution of support to commissioners at their Aug. 13 briefing, there was a lot of discussion about the past.

Commissioners talked about the lawsuits that have dogged the project. They debated whether legislators were responsible for letting money for the project get away. They talked about how the focus had shifted from the western to the eastern leg of the beltway and one -- Walter Marshall -- expressed sympathy for the property owners in roadway's path.

When commissioners met Monday, the requested resolution had been pulled from the agenda. Some commissioners question what a resolution would accomplish; they have no direct say over road construction.

Gayle Anderson, the president and chief executive of the chamber, said she talked with Commissioners Debra Conrad and Ted Kaplan and learned that they wanted to talk about all road needs.

"There was no deadline to get it done, and when they said we want to look at the bigger picture we said that was fine," Anderson said. "I would say that we have not yet had the opportunity to state our case. Particularly on a controversial issue a lot of times you don't get a unanimous vote. We feel that given enough time we could get a majority vote from the commissioners."

Citizen opponents of the beltway filed suit in 1999 to stop the western leg of the route, which was at that time the first section up for construction. In 2008 opponents again filed suit, saying that an environmental study of both the eastern and western beltway segments was flawed. That stopped the state's purchase of right of way on the project, which had refocused on completing the eastern leg first.

Kaplan guessed that the chamber's resolution "probably would have passed" had it come

to a vote this week, but he said that several board members wanted a broader discussion.

"Several of the commissioners were concerned about parts of the beltway and how it might relate to the Heart of the Triad and whether the beltway as originally planned was a viable route," Kaplan said.

The Heart of the Triad is a planning effort that focuses on the possible future development of an area on the border of Forsyth and Guilford counties.

But Kaplan isn't sure commissioners and other elected officials should be getting into the domain of highway engineers.

"One of the things I said to commissioners is that we are not traffic engineers or experts," Kaplan said, adding that commissioners hear both from those in favor of the beltway and those opposed. "I remember the days when politicians decided when roads were going to be built."

Commissioner Richard Linville said that, had the chamber resolution stayed on the agenda, he would have wanted a review of the project's history from state officials.

But Commissioner Dave Plyler, the chairman of the board of commissioner, said that chamber officials probably didn't want the resolution to dredge up the controversy surrounding the project.

One concern raised by the chamber's draft resolution is the frustration felt by some people in the beltway's proposed path who are stuck with properties that they can neither sell nor improve.

A.C. Reynolds Jr., the owner of Reynolds Automotive, a business in the beltway's path, said the state should either go forward with plans to buy his property or scrap the road project and let landowners get on with their lives. His business is on University Parkway at the site of a proposed beltway interchange.

"I could sell the property, but they won't issue building permits or driveway permits to whoever buys the property," Reynolds said. He said that pro-beltway forces need to unite their efforts as opponents did.

Robin Dean, an outspoken opponent of the road, said that people on his side weren't worried about the chamber resolution "because nobody in the community believes this road is ever going to be built."

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