

Northern Beltway is stalled

Road-construction projects are hit by shortfalls in tight state budget

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The Northern Beltway, a project marked for decades by opposition and delay, is now falling victim to a more basic problem - lack of money.

A projected budget shortfall of nearly \$30 billion for road construction projects over the next 25 years has led state officials to decide to begin the beltway project with its eastern half, in 2009.

The start date for the western leg of the beltway, which was supposed to have begun next year and has always been the portion that drew the most opposition, has been pushed back until beyond 2012, unless money becomes available earlier, state officials say. The entire \$716 million beltway, first discussed in 1962, is intended to loop nearly 30 miles around more than two-thirds of Winston-Salem. It would run from U.S. 158 in Clemmons to U.S. 52 near Rural Hall and on through Walkertown and Kernersville to U.S. 311.

The beltway's \$351 million, 12.6-mile eastern leg, which has been designated as the future path of Interstate 74, is also close to such major commercial developments as a new FedEx cargo distribution hub and a Dell Inc. manufacturing plant.

The decision to shift the construction focus was made because there isn't enough state road-construction money to proceed with both legs at the same time, said Nancy Dunn, Winston-Salem's representative on the N.C. Board of Transportation.

Dunn said that although the \$365 million, 16.7-mile western leg is badly needed to relieve traffic congestion, the eastern leg is more crucial to both the city and region's long-term transportation future. Delaying the western leg also will ensure that money remains available for the eastern portion, she said.

"There was going to have to be a big delay somewhere," Dunn said. "We felt that we could afford a delay better on the west than on the east because of all the factors involved. "We wanted the entire beltway. This was a difficult decision, but we actually had to fight hard just to get funding for the eastern leg."

Dunn said that the needs for the eastern half of the highway are more immediate because the road will take traffic off overburdened U.S. 52.

The western leg of the beltway was just days from getting started in 1999 when opponents won a ruling in federal court that postponed construction until an environmental-impact study could be redone.

About 40 percent of the land needed for the western leg has been bought by the state. Although the N.C. Department of Transportation won't be buying more right of way in the western corridor until the project is back on track for construction, money will be available to buy out some property owners who need to sell. "If there are hardship cases there will be resources to handle that," Dunn said.

Mayor Allen Joines of Winston-Salem said that although the case for building the eastern leg of the loop first has merit, he is concerned about people with homes and other property in the western leg's corridor.

"We need the entire road, there's no question of that," Joines said. "But if you had to choose between the two, the eastern leg is very important. As long as we can keep the property owners from being in limbo, I guess it's the best that we can hope for."

Dunn and Pat Ivey, the DOT division engineer for Forsyth County, said that the western leg of the beltway will remain one of their top priorities because of the traffic congestion in that half of the county. "We haven't given up on the western side by any means," Ivey said. "That road is going to have to be built. If not, there's going to be serious problems."

Clemmons resident Robin Dean has long been one of the beltway's harshest critics. Dean said he doesn't want to see the beltway built at all because he believes that it will lead to more urban sprawl and traffic congestion. He said he believes that there are better ways to deal with the area's transportation problems.

He also said that if state officials insist on building the beltway, he favors construction of the eastern leg first because it will ease traffic on U.S. 52.

"I'm still against the beltway," Dean said. "But this makes more sense because at least they are putting safety before development."

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