

Officials explore moving up bypass

By Michael Abramowitz
The Daily Reflector
Monday, August 20, 2012

Greenville officials are exploring ways to move up the schedule for construction of a major traffic corridor connecting U.S. 264 in Greenville to N.C. 11 in Ayden.

The "Southwest Bypass" project has progressed to the design and development phase despite objections from some residents along the projected path. The goal is to provide improved traffic flow, mitigate congestion and improve safety on Memorial Drive and Stantonsburg Road.

It also is intended to improve regional travel along the U.S. 264/N.C. 11 corridor, state officials said.

State engineers began planning for the 11-mile, \$226.3 million state-funded project in 2008 after completion of an environmental impact study that included a series of public hearings that looked at five alternatives, from which a final corridor was selected.

During the next phase, accelerated by DOT to 2014 from 2017, state officials will conduct right-of-way transactions with property owners within the corridor boundaries to purchase properties, said Ray McIntyre, a department program developer.

Some residents of the Renston Rural Historic District situated along N.C. 903 between Winterville and Ayden are unhappy that the corridor will run through and change the pastoral landscape. Among them is attorney Charles McLawhorn, who said on Friday he is passionate about his cause.

"I'm not trying to stop the highway; I'm trying to protect the area," McLawhorn said. "I'll spend 1,000 hours in court defending this."

None of the final alternatives developed by the state planners took the corridor outside of the Renston district. Then, a number of subdivisions were developed in the wide space between Renston and N.C. 11 because developers could not see the planned bypass corridor on a map, McLawhorn said.

The final layout of the bypass corridor runs just west of those subdivisions, through Renston. DOT officials deemed it to have the least impact environmentally and most practical alternative for the project.

"We looked at some options, but none balanced the impacts against the purpose of the project," DOT official Brian Yamamoto said.

McLawhorn said the state also is disqualified from using federal funds, which normally account for 80 percent of state highway project costs, because the project intersects a rural historic district. McIntyre said the point is moot because the project is being financed under a special dedicated state trust fund for urban loops.

There is an effort under way by Greenville Metropolitan Planning Organization members to push the start of the three-phased schedule ahead even sooner, McIntyre said, but funding is based on a prioritization process that places Greenville in competition with others throughout the state.

Ayden Mayor Steve Tripp and the other MPO members were concerned about financing the Ayden segment of the project, which has not been designated for funds, Greenville Mayor Allen Thomas said. Some suggestions from DOT staff for realigning portions of the construction process should allow for all three segments of the project to be funded on the state's improvement plan, Thomas said.

"We sent them a proposal ... with the understanding that we have limited funds in our budget for this project," McIntyre said. "We indicated that Greenville and/or Pitt County could agree to loan funds for the project to potentially accelerate it. If they want to consider that possibility, they can present us with a request and we would, in turn, present that to our board for its consideration."

The amount required for that portion of the project would be about \$26.3 million, all of which would be paid back by the state when funds arise, McIntyre said.

Thomas did not mention that funding option in a Thursday conversation, but he emphasized that the project holds great strategic importance for the area's economic development.

"Substantial actions and accomplishments don't happen by accident," he said. "We have to stay alert and ahead of the curve, think strategically and make things happen. This project extends our transportation infrastructure to allow for significant growth and connectivity with the Global TransPark in Kinston, providing enormous growth potential for our city and region for decades to come."

Contact Michael Abramowitz at mabramowitz@reflector.com or 252-329-9571