Raleigh City Council endorses turning part of US-1 into toll road

The tolls would then allow the NC Department of Transportation (NCDOT) to turn the four-lane road into a six-lane expressway, with interchanges instead of traffic lights.

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Generic photo of a construction barrell.

WRAL staff

During a Tuesday meeting of the Raleigh City Council, members endorsed a plan to make a portion of U.S. Highway 1 a toll road.

Council members voted 7-1 to endorse charging drivers a toll to drive on Capital Boulevard between Interstate 540 in north Raleigh and Purnell Road in Wake Forest. The tolls would then allow the NC Department of Transportation (NCDOT) to turn the four-lane road into a six-lane expressway, with interchanges instead of traffic lights.

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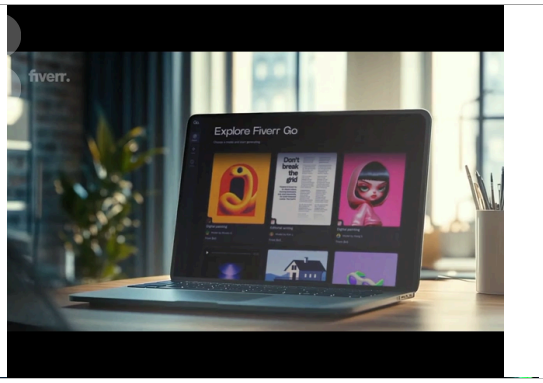
NCDOT estimates between 32,000 and 65,000 vehicles travel the stretch of Capital Boulevard daily, and it could increase to as many as 75,000 vehicles traveling daily by 2040.

Four options were presented to the council members based on a survey requested by the North Carolina Turnpike Authority:

- Option 1: Tolling the entire 10-mile stretch as a standalone toll road, which would raise an estimated $800 million.
- Option 2: Tolling the entire 10 miles, but adding it to the NC Turnpike system, which allows the state to borrow more money and would generate an estimated $1.4 billion.
- Option 3: Build and toll one express lane in each direction. The existing four-lane road would remain free and raise an estimated $100 million.
- Option 4: Build and toll one express lane in each direction and add them to the NC Turnpike system. With additional borrowing power, the lanes would raise an estimated $600 million.

City council members backed option 2, which would allow construction to begin in 2027 and finish in 2033. North Carolina law prohibits the conversion of free highways into toll roads, so the project would need "state legislative action" to exempt the expressway project similar to the Triangle Expressway.

In April, the Capital Area Metropolitan Planning Organization (CAMPO) told WRAL News the plan to convert U.S. 1 into a freeway had been under discussion for decades, but the project was repeatedly delayed over time and costs kept rising. CAMPO then partnered with NC Turnpike Authority to investigate the possibility of funding the project by turning it into a toll road.



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"I think everyone probably agrees, if we can get something not tolled, we would take it," said Chris Lukasina, CAMPO executive director. "The real issue came in this is the fifth delay. Do we want to wait two more years for what is likely another delay to the project?"

While council members overwhelmingly endorsed the proposal, it was not without some reluctance. Megan Patton, whose district is on the edge of Capital Boulevard north of I-540, voted against it, adding her constituents were mostly opposed to the expressway itself.

"When I've taken this out to the community, every resident I've spoke to understands that no toll means no build," she said. "For them, that seems to resonate as being the better option than any of the tolled scenarios."

Jonathan Lambert-Melton, an at large member on the council, also said he heard from residents in his district on the road as well.

While Patton understood that city council backed the expressway and tolls, she asked that tolls be cheaper at night or off-peak hours and that the road be designed to handle bus rapid transit in the future. Lambert-Melton added he believed the project would move ahead with tolls anyway, and what mattered more was the option the council would chose.

CAMPO said adding tolls to the project would allow the region to finance the expressway construction upfront and pay the costs with future toll incentives. North Carolina law states that once a toll facility has paid off its construction costs through toll revenue, tolling infrastructure will be removed

WRAL News spoke with several residents who drive the 10-mile stretch daily, most of whom said they would've preferred an option that would include a single toll lane.

"One lane would be so much better, and I think people might use that," said one driver.

The endorsement by council members will now be passed to the CAMPO board, which is comprised of representatives from cities towns and counties in and surrounding Wake County, for a final decision. Residents can chime in online through May 14 at publicinput.com/US_1_TollingOptions.

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