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LOCAL

‘A long time coming’: Durham East End Connector finally opens to traffic

BY RICHARD STRADLING

UPDATED JUNE 30, 2022 3:05 PM



Take an aerial tour of the new Durham East End Connector. The 1.25 miles of highway connects the Durham Freeway with U.S. 70, creating a new bypass on the east side of town known as Interstate 885. BY ETHAN HYMAN



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DURHAM

The ceremonial opening of the Durham East End Connector on Thursday had all the usual trappings, including speeches by politicians and the cutting of a big ribbon.

But underneath the smiles and back-slapping was the understanding that the highway was opening nearly three years later than expected.

Construction of the 1.25-mile freeway connecting N.C. 147 with U.S. 70 began in early 2015 and was originally supposed to be done in 2019. Planning took even longer, after a decades-old idea of a freeway across the east side of Durham was revived in the 1990s.

“When we say that this project has been a long time in the making, we mean a long time in the making,” said state Sen. Natalie Murdock, who represents Durham. “But today we have finally reached the finish line.”

The new highway makes it easier for drivers to get between Research Triangle Park and Interstate 85 without threading their way on local streets through Durham.

“This East End Connector will greatly reduce our traffic volumes in central Durham,” said Elaine O’Neal, the city’s mayor. “And it will provide a quicker connection to areas north of I-85 and make it more safe for local drivers and pedestrians in Durham.”

Building the connector displaced 22 homes and 33 businesses. But the highway project will also help local residents rather than simply impose on them, said state

Rep. Zack Hawkins, who lives in Southeast Durham.

“For those who will use this route daily, this connector provides a more effective link from East and Southeast Durham to downtown and other important areas,” Hawkins said. The highway, he said, will bring an end to “using back roads and spending up to 30 minutes in traffic waiting to move from highway 70 to the Durham Freeway, as I personally experience and hear consistently from my constituents.”

NCDOT PENALIZES THE CONTRACTOR FOR DELAYS

As problems arose during the course of the project, the N.C. Department of Transportation extended the deadline for opening the highway to Oct. 1, 2021. At that point, NCDOT began penalizing the contractor, [Dragados USA](#), at a rate of \$10,000 a day, said spokesman Marty Homan.

Add in other penalties for unfinished bridge rehab work and for lane closures that went on too long and NCDOT plans to withhold about \$3.7 million from the company, Homan said.

Dragados, part of the Spanish construction conglomerate [ACS Group](#), won [a \\$142 million contract for the connector](#), which was really two projects in one. In addition to building 1.25 miles of new highway, Dragados also converted 2.75 miles of U.S. 70 to a freeway just south of I-85.

Project manager Jorge Andres said the company considers the project substantially completed, though planting trees and paving parts of Holloway and other side streets may take another two months. Andres said Dragados will negotiate with NCDOT to try to lower the penalties.

“For sure. We need to,” he said just before Thursday’s ceremony. “But I still don’t know exactly how I’m going to handle that, because after today we need to sit down and start talking.”

A NEW INTERSTATE HIGHWAY IN THE TRIANGLE

The ribbon-cutting ceremony took place in the southbound lanes of the new highway, in the shade of an overpass. The pavement was clean and the white and yellow lane markings still sharp. NCDOT rolled back the construction barrels and let the first cars through by mid-afternoon.

With the connector, the [Triangle officially has a new interstate highway](https://www.newsobserver.com/news/local/article263034853.html). Interstate 885 runs from the U.S. 70 interchange with I-85 south through Research Triangle Park to Interstate 40, where it becomes Toll N.C. 885 down to N.C. 540 in Wake County.

The opening of the Durham East End Connector means new highway and exit numbers in Durham. *NCDOT*

The City of Durham [conceived of the East End Connector in 1959](#), when it first appeared on city plans. But the highway didn't become a priority for NCDOT for another 50 years.

"It's been a long time coming," former mayor Nick Tennyson, by then NCDOT's chief deputy secretary, said when the construction contract was awarded in 2015.

It would be a longer time coming than Tennyson or anyone else expected. Now retired from NCDOT, he was on hand for Thursday's opening.

"This was a complex thing to build," he said. "I'm sorry it took that long, but I'm confident it was built well."

NCDOT and Dragados say most of the delay was caused by a temporary railroad bridge built to carry CSX and Norfolk Southern trains over U.S. 70 near the merge with the new freeway.

The temporary bridge, used while a new permanent one was built, was supposed to come down in 2018. But problems completing the permanent bridge meant the temporary one was needed until this winter, and the piers holding it up prevented contractors from finishing the interchange.

"Once a project starts, things inevitably come up that aren't expected," said Joey Hopkins, who was NCDOT's local division engineer when construction started and is now the department's chief operating officer.

“Some things may not go as planned. Some things take longer than planned. This is a very complex project,” Hopkins said. “I don’t want today’s focus to be on those issues or delays. I want us to celebrate.”

The Durham East End Connector, looking towards U.S. 70, photographed Tuesday, June 28, 2022. The 1.25 miles of highway connects the Durham Freeway with U.S. 70, creating a new bypass on the east side of town known as Interstate 885. Ethan Hyman ehyman@newsobserver.com

This story was originally published June 30, 2022 1:02 PM.

RICHARD STRADLING



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Richard Stradling covers transportation for The News & Observer. Planes, trains and automobiles, plus ferries, bicycles, scooters and just plain walking. Also, hospitals during the coronavirus outbreak. He’s been a reporter or editor for 35 years, including the last 23 at The N&O. 919-829-4739, rstradling@newsobserver.com.

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BY T. KEUNG HUI

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NORTH CAROLINA NEWS

NC General Assembly votes to use sales tax money for transportation

by: [Michael Hyland](#)

Posted: Jul 5, 2022 / 04:52 PM EDT

Updated: Jul 5, 2022 / 08:40 PM EDT

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RALEIGH, N.C. (WNCN) – Amid concerns about the long-term reliability of the gas tax, North Carolina would use money from the state's sales tax to help fund transportation under the new state budget the General Assembly recently passed.

The budget plan, which Gov. Roy Cooper (D) has not said yet if he's going to sign, calls for allocating two percent of sales tax revenue this year for the Department of Transportation's needs. That would increase to four percent next year and then six percent every year after that.

It's estimated that would lead to more than \$625 million being available for transportation annually without increasing the taxes people pay.

[Raleigh approves ban on wild animal ownership](#) >

State lawmakers from both parties have supported the proposal, noting that as an increasing number of drivers switch to more fuel-efficient and electric vehicles, the state will need new sources of revenue to build and maintain roads.

“It’s not everything we need, but it’s a nice step in the right direction,” Marc Finlayson said, the chair of NC Go!, a coalition of groups that advocates for transportation. “We have to take into account all of these dynamic changes that are happening in transportation and factor all of that into our thinking.”

The North Carolina Department of Transportation has an annual operating budget of about \$5 billion, and motor fuel taxes are the largest source of revenue. The state’s gas tax is 38.5 cents per gallon while the federal gas tax is about 18 cents per gallon.

The agency convened a group called the NC FIRST Commission, that [released a report in 2021](#) calling for various changes to try to ensure the state would have the funding it needs going forward to meet demand.

North Carolina State economist Mike Walden served on that commission.

“We’re going to have funding problems with transportation in the future,” he said. “Everyone who pays the sales tax is benefiting in some way from the transportation network even if you don’t use a vehicle because obviously goods and services get delivered.”

Walden said in the long term, he thinks the state will need to move to fees drivers pay based on the miles they drive.

The Eastern Transportation Coalition is [launching a pilot program](#) in North Carolina to study that.

Walden said there are still issues to try to resolve with that approach, including having the technology installed in vehicles to track mileage and ensuring drivers are not tracked wherever they go.

“I think clearly by 2030, we would start to feel some of the impacts of not having enough money, that is to say that in growing areas like the Triangle we would see more congestion,” Walden said. “This is not an issue that is going to take a while to manifest itself. I think it will manifest itself very, very quickly.”

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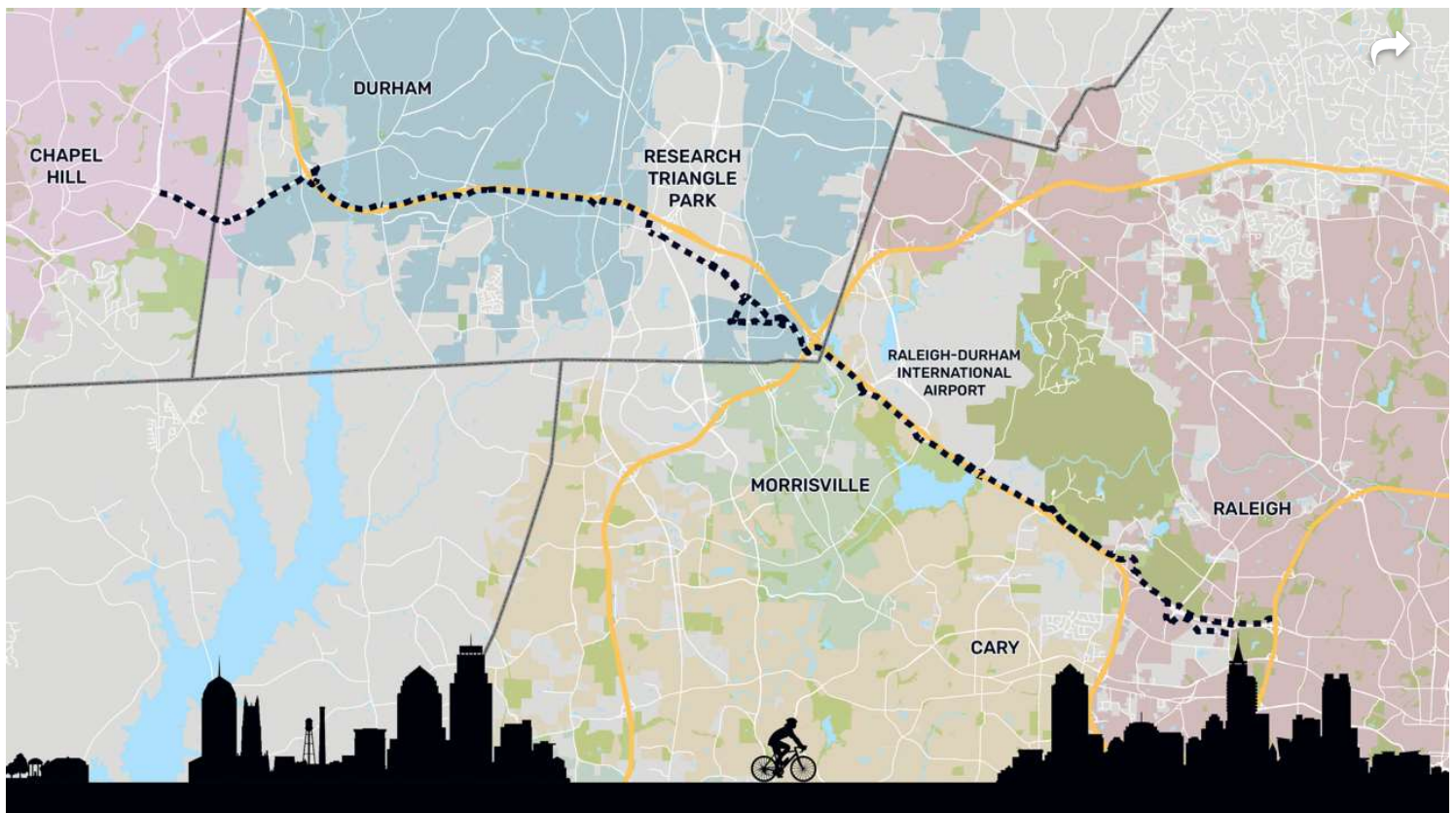
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LOCAL

Proposed bicycle highway between Raleigh and RTP gets boost from Wake commissioners

BY RICHARD STRADLING

UPDATED JULY 06, 2022 1:15 PM



The proposed Triangle Bikeway is a 17-mile paved path along I-40 and NC 54 between Chapel Hill and Raleigh. Regional transportation planners have refined the concept and identified a likely route and are now seeking public feedback. BY TRIANGLEBIKEWAY.COM | MCADAMS



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RALEIGH

Wake County commissioners have thrown their support behind the eastern section of the Triangle Bikeway, a planned paved trail for cyclists and pedestrians that could one day parallel Interstate 40 between Raleigh and Chapel Hill.

Commissioners voted recently to spend \$1.4 million on final designs and environmental studies for the project's Wake section. Meanwhile, [the Research Triangle Foundation](#) has put up \$485,000 for the same work on the trail in [Research Triangle Park](#).

That's still an estimated \$3.3 million short of what's needed to get ready for construction of the trail between Raleigh and RTP, according to Sig Hutchinson, chair of the Wake commissioners. U.S. Sen. Richard Burr is seeking to have Congress provide the rest of the money next year, but Senate budget writers haven't committed to that yet.

Hutchinson [conceived of the Triangle Bikeway several years ago](#) to make it easier for people to ride to work on their bikes. [A study completed last year identified a preferred route for the eastern section](#), following Wade Avenue, I-40 and N.C. 54 between the [N.C. Museum of Art](#) and [the Hub](#) and [Boxyard](#) in RTP.

The 16-foot-wide paved trail would connect greenway systems in Raleigh, Cary and RTP with large employers, including campuses for Apple, Bandwidth and the state Department of Health and Human Services, as well as [Lake Crabtree County Park](#) and [Umstead State Park](#).

“This corridor is the connective tissue that ties the entire region together,” Hutchinson told fellow county commissioners last month. “This is absolutely huge in terms of its ability to get people from one point to the next.”

The federal money for designs and environmental studies is not assured; an earlier attempt by U.S. Rep. David Price to persuade Congress to pay for them failed. Hutchinson told commissioners if that happens again he would return to ask the county to provide the remaining \$3.3 million.

The board voted to provide the initial \$1.4 million, using money generated by bonds issued for greenways, approved by voters in 2018. The commissioners’ vote was unanimous, though Vickie Adamson expressed misgivings, saying she thought the timing was wrong.

“We have citizens who are really struggling, and we’re building transportation corridors,” she said.

Adamson also questioned why local governments and other organizations have expressed support for the project but that only Wake is putting up money for the final designs and environmental studies.

“In my world, how we know you’re our partner is you don’t send us a letter, you write a check to help pay for it,” she said. “That’s how I know you’re a partner.”

Hutchinson said he was confident that local, state and federal governments, as well as private donors, would help pay for construction of the bikeway, which he described as a \$50 million project. But he said it was important for the county to get the bikeway ready to go.

Other commissioners said they were excited about the project. Maria Cervania said a growing number of people are looking to ride bikes for both recreation and as a means of transportation to parks, work or social gatherings.

“That’s exciting for a lot of people,” Cervania said. “And we have to know that this is what a fair amount of our people want.”

THE BIKEWAY WOULD FOLLOW THE HIGHWAY

The Wake County section of the Triangle Bikeway would mostly be built within the I-40 right-of-way. The N.C. Department of Transportation has been involved in planning and says there’s room for the bike trail separated by a fence a safe distance from traffic.

The trail would depart from the interstate near I-540 and follow N.C. 54 into RTP. That’s so the trail would pass [GoTriangle’s planned regional bus center](#) and a

potential commuter rail station near the intersection of N.C. 54 and Miami Boulevard, as well as come closer to companies in the park, said Iona Thomas of [McAdams, a firm that help develop the preliminary designs](#).

The bikeway would connect with 18 miles of greenway trails that coarse through RTP. Most of the trails are old and narrow, and the Research Triangle Foundation plans to bring them up to modern greenway standards over the coming decade, said Travis Crayton, the foundation's planner.

"Having the Triangle Bikeway as a spine to connect to that network makes it not just a recreation opportunity for folks working in Research Triangle Park but also creates a transportation opportunity," Crayton said. "We've learned so much from other regions that have invested in greenways as transportation corridors and amenities and the benefits that those have brought those regions, and we think it makes a ton of sense for our region as well."

The bikeway may eventually continue west along I-40, then follow N.C. 54 into Chapel Hill. Plans for the western stretch are less detailed, and local officials in Durham and Orange counties are not prepared to get the project started there.

Thomas at McAdams said completing the final designs and environmental studies for the eastern segment could take 18 to 24 months, once the funding is lined up. That would put the start of construction sometime in 2024 at the earliest, assuming money is available.

Thomas and McAdams may not be involved in creating the final designs; the work would be put out to competitive bid and could go to another firm.

But that wouldn't diminish her enthusiasm for the bikeway.

"If you were visiting this area, and you get off an airplane and you're sitting in traffic on I-40 and you see people zipping by on e-bikes, it tells you a lot about our region," she said. "I think it's a way for us to kind of future-proof our region, continue to attract great companies that want these kinds of facilities for quality of life for their employees."

This story was originally published July 6, 2022 10:48 AM.

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State budget proposal seeks to lessen NC's dependence on gas taxes for transportation

BY RICHARD STRADLING UPDATED JUNE 30, 2022 1:45 PM

RALEIGH Republican state lawmakers want to reduce North Carolina's dependence on the gas tax to pay for roads and bridges, starting with the proposed budget released late Tuesday. The budget calls for redirecting 2% of state sales tax revenue to the N.C. Department of Transportation in the fiscal year that begins July 1. The diversion would increase to 4% the following year and 6% each year after that. The change would generate an estimated \$193.1 million for transportation the first year, increasing to an estimated \$628 million by year three. That money would otherwise go into the General Fund, the nearly \$28 billion that finances most of the rest of state government. The idea has wide support among business groups and transportation advocates. It provides new revenue for NCDOT by tapping into an existing tax at a time when the state enjoys a budget surplus, says Marc Finlayson, who heads NC Go, a coalition of groups that presses for improved transportation. "This funding would help our state to modernize our sources of transportation revenue and provide a new, sustainable source," Finlayson said in a written statement. "Best of all, there are no new taxes or fees involved." Finlayson said the state collects about \$500 million a year in taxes on transportation-related purchases, such as tires, parts and repairs. "It makes sense some of these funds should be used to meet transportation needs," he said. NCDOT spends about \$5 billion a year, and gas taxes are its largest source of revenue. The state tax of 38.5 cents per gallon generates about \$1.8 billion a year; the federal gas tax — 18.4 cents on unleaded fuel and 24.4 cents on diesel — accounts for most of the \$1.25 billion NCDOT receives each year from the federal government. But the gas tax has become a less dependable source of revenue as improved mileage means people pay less in taxes to drive the same distance. And with electric vehicles coming on to the market in large numbers, more drivers will be using the road without paying any gas taxes at all. NCDOT set out to find alternatives to the gas tax in 2019 when it created the N.C. First Commission, comprising business people, politicians, economists and others. The commission's final report in early 2021 included several ideas, including using sales tax revenue from transportation-related purchases. The N.C. Chamber, a statewide business group, published its own reports on possible new sources of transportation revenue in 2015 and 2020, and noted that several states, including Virginia, devote general sales tax revenue to highways and other transportation. When Republicans unveiled their budget proposal Tuesday, the chamber singled out the sales tax diversion for praise. "As growing numbers of motorists adopt electric vehicles and vehicle manufacturers commit to ever-higher EV production targets, traditional funding options like the motor fuels tax are becoming less and less viable," said Jake Cashion, who heads the Chamber's Destination 2030 Coalition, which advocates for new transportation funding. The chamber also said the additional revenue would help NCDOT deal with rising costs for fuel, labor and real estate. Senate Leader Phil Berger's office described the proposed sales tax transfer as "a first step to address declining transportation revenues," suggesting other alternatives to the gas tax may be in the works. Fuels taxes account for about half of state revenue for transportation, while the rest comes from Division of Motor Vehicle registration fees and the "highway use tax," which is a 3% sales tax when a vehicle's title changes hands and an 8% tax on vehicle rentals. It's not clear how quickly electricity will displace petroleum on North Carolina highways. Zero emission vehicles account for only about 40,000 of North Carolina's 8.6 million registered vehicles, according to the DMV, but in January Gov. Roy Cooper laid out plans to increase that number to at least 1.25 million by 2030. Asked about the proposed use of sales tax revenue for transportation, Cooper's office said only that he is reviewing the proposed budget.

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LOCAL

State budget proposal seeks to lessen NC's dependence on gas taxes for transportation

BY RICHARD STRADLING

UPDATED JUNE 30, 2022 1:45 PM



Business was brisk at the BP station on U.S. 70 business in Garner, N.C., on March 9, 2022. State and federal gas taxes account for the majority of transportation spending in North Carolina. ROBERT WILLETT

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RALEIGH

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This story was originally published June 30, 2022 5:45 AM.

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