

Beltway is long way off

Eastern leg is at bottom of DOT's 10-year list of projects

By Wesley Young | Journal Reporter

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Dead last.

That's where the eastern leg of Winston-Salem's proposed Northern Beltway ranks on the N.C. Department of Transportation's draft list of urban-loop construction projects.

Even the western leg of the beltway -- one that local officials no longer see as the top priority -- ranks higher than the eastern leg but is still not among the projects that state highway officials plan to recommend building over the next 10 years.

"We have to look at the state as a whole," said Greer Beaty, the director of communications for the state transportation department. "We developed the process with input from areas all across the state. No community was singled out. We have to look at a formula that is fair to everybody."

The draft list will undergo a year of public comment and

review, Beaty said. The priority list won't be adopted until summer 2011, and changes are still possible.

"This is the starting point," Beaty said.

The low ranking is a blow to beltway supporters, who in May won a dismissal of lawsuits that had stalled the project for more than 10 years.

Many of the people were hopeful that the state would now find money for the long-delayed project, and have taken their lobbying efforts as far as the governor's office.

The beltway's ranking is likely to be a hot topic of conversation tonight at a meeting in the Sedge Garden community sponsored by a citizens group of beltway advocates.

"We are again being abandoned," said A.C. Reynolds, who is active in the group, called Northern Beltway NOW. Reynolds said that government leaders are showing a "don't-care attitude."

Tonight's meeting will start at 6:30 at Sedge Garden Swim and Racquet Club, at 300 Oak Grove Church Road. The mayor of Winston-Salem, Allen Joines, is expected to attend along with Ralph Womble, who represents the area on the N.C. Board of Transportation.

The long-awaited draft list of urban-loop projects will be officially released during next week's meeting of the state transportation board, which will take place Wednesday and Thursday. The *Winston-Salem Journal* obtained the draft list in advance by requesting it from state officials under public-records law.

The eastern leg has been designated as the future path of Interstate 74 and will pull traffic off an overburdened U.S. 52.

For months, local officials have waited to see how the beltway would rank, hoping for the best but worrying that the priority formula would penalize the city because no sections of the beltway have been built.

The formula used to rank projects on the list involves calculating the benefits of a project, then dividing that by the project's total cost. The eastern leg of the Winston-Salem beltway, projected to cost \$840 million, is easily the most expensive among the 21 projects that the state listed on the draft list. The western leg, with a projected cost of \$455 million, is in 16th place.

A separate draft work schedule shows only eight of the 21 projects getting money over the next 10 years for construction or buying right of way.

The cities with projects on the schedule are Charlotte, Durham, Fayetteville, Wilmington, Greenville and Greensboro. Greensboro has two projects on the list, sections of the western and eastern loops.

"I am absolutely appalled," said Gayle Anderson, the president and chief executive of the Winston-Salem Chamber of Commerce.

"We have been waiting longer for our beltway than any other community. Now they have changed the whole game in terms of the formula that has put us at a disadvantage," Anderson said.

Joines said that the city of Winston-Salem must continue pushing the state for beltway help.

"I don't know how the DOT can look at the fourth-largest city in the state and rank it last," he said. "I think the formula is flawed. It should be based on congestion and safety and traffic demand. When you divide it by the cost of the project, Winston-Salem will never get out of the bottom."

State officials said that meetings involving citizen input on the draft would start about the middle of January 2011 and be wrapped up around the first of May. The plan is for the state transportation board to adopt a priority list no later than August 2011.

Womble called building the eastern leg of the loop a critical priority, not only for the community but for all the landowners who are in its path.

"When they say it is a draft, there is still time for work to be done," Womble said.

Robin Dean, a member of the groups that fought the beltway in court, said that the beltway's low ranking doesn't make him happy.

"The government or DOT and the legislature have allowed both the east and the west people to get caught up in a project that should have been got rid of years ago," Dean said. "I'm not happy that they are going to create more hardship."

Anderson said that if the draft list holds, the state will have broken promises made by past state administrations: that money for the beltway would come once the lawsuits were over.

"We have been nice and cooperative," Anderson said. "It is time for us to raise as much Cain as can possibly be raised to show that this community is being treated unfairly."

State officials say that some communities are getting road construction done by embarking on toll-road projects. Jim Trogdon, the chief operating officer of the DOT, said that under the traditional financing methods, there is not enough money to go around.

"We have about \$8 billion worth of loops to build, and doing that on a budget of \$150 million per year," Trogdon said.

"Prioritization is extremely important, but no matter how well we prioritize, nothing is going to change that fact."

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