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Connector planners respond to business owners’ requests

By Kathryn Kennedy
The Daily Reflector

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Planners designing the Stantonsburg Road-10th Street connector project reworked plans for intersections at 14th and Evans streets to reduce impact on businesses there, Greenville officials announced at a meeting Thursday.

The planned four-lane roadway — which includes green medians, bike lanes and sidewalks — will connect East Carolina University with Pitt County Memorial Hospital and the Brody School of Medicine and is scheduled for construction in 2013. The road will be built through residential, industrial and commercial areas of west Greenville between the west end of 10th Street and Stantonsburg Road.

Business owners in April requested planners change the proposed right-of-way at the intersections to protect their property. The state Department of Transportation will purchase property inside the right-of-way and some owners will have to relocate.

Air Mania Owner William Gorham is one of approximately four 14th Street business owners who can continue operating as usual following the alteration.

"I'm definitely pleased," he said after the meeting. "It's the outcome I hoped for. But it asks the question, 'Why would it take us (asking for the shift)?'

"Someone should learn from the mistakes that were made. Nobody wins in this. We were fortunate."

The adjustment also saved at least six residences on the north side of the street.

The intersection with Evans Street also was changed by eliminating an additional lane, said Jeff Moore, project manager with Kimley-Horn and Associates consulting. He said the street will remain "pretty close to the width out there today," affecting no properties instead of eight as earlier estimated.

It is unclear how many total businesses, residents and property owners will be relocated by the connector as the project steering committee has yet to choose between three proposals. Because of that, some locals still have questions.

Janette Cox, co-owner of Hardee and Cox Welding, has been outspoken about the project for several months. Her property will be affected regardless of which option is selected. She wants business owners to meet with the entire steering committee before any final decision. The committee is composed of a representative from the state DOT, one from ECU, one from PCMH, Community Development Director Merrill Flood and City Engineer David Brown.

"We're looking at mid-to-late July," Brown said. "I'm waiting on confirmation from a final member."

Cox also is frustrated that the City Council appropriated funds for homeowner recovery in 2007, but hasn't addressed the needs of businesses that will have to relocate.

Greenville City Councilwoman Rose Glover told Cox she will have the issue placed on the Council's agenda for either August or September. Mayor Pat Dunn, Mayor Pro-Tem Mildred Council and Councilman Bryant Kittrell also attended Thursday's meeting.

More city officials and project representatives were present compared to April's meeting, but fewer business owners attended and it was a quieter crowd.
Pitt County Commissioner Tom Johnson spoke often during the meeting and advised the steering committee members to act quickly.

“There’s no way to do any project of this magnitude without adversely affecting a number of people," he said. "Non-decision is disruptive to a community.”

A state DOT representative said they hope to have a community impact assessment completed sometime in July. Right-of-way acquisition is slated to begin in 2011 with construction following in 2013.

More information about the Stantonsburg Road-10th Street Connector can be found at http://www.greenvillenc.gov/departments/public_works_dept/default.aspx?id=5732

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Jim Mitchell, an East Carolina University researcher cited in the report, conducted a study finding that older, rural residents of the state have higher rates of disability and lower incomes than their counterparts in urban areas of the state.

With the trend continuing, those residents will clearly put more pressure on the Medicaid health insurance program for the poor, a program that has already grown faster than any other part of the state budget over the past two decades.

In 2005-06, Medicaid financed 45 percent of all the rest home and nursing home care provided in the state for residents 65 and older, according to the report.

"Absent fundamental reform, North Carolina likely will face state budget challenges as it strives to help older citizens afford health care," the report concludes.

The center also asks whether an older population will be less supportive of their tax dollars going toward services that don't directly affect them, like public schools.

An area not explored in detail by the report is the potential conflict, at the policy level, created by a growing aging population versus an overall population that is becoming increasingly concentrated in urban areas.

As that urban growth continues, more and more legislators will be elected from those areas, rather than rural North Carolina.

A more urban legislature will be forced to balance the needs of the aging with the needs of high-growth metropolitan areas.

Sometimes the needs will overlap. Sometimes they won't.

Scott Mooneyham writes about North Carolina government and politics for the Capitol Press Association.
Talking taxes

A consensus is emerging that taxes in North Carolina will have to go up. Now the hard calls -- which ones and how much?

A couple of weeks ago, when Gov. Beverly Perdue surveyed the carnage in a state budget to be balanced by spending cuts alone and declared the proposed cuts "horrific," it wasn't hard to figure where things were headed. Perdue was bound to affirm the sensible conclusion that when wrestling with a shortfall amounting to some 20 percent of the budget, part of the solution must lie on the revenue side.

So here we are. The governor, cheered on by the teachers from whose ranks she first emerged, now says she favors raising taxes to bring in at least another $1 billion, perhaps as much as $1.5 billion, to help fill the chasm in the budget that takes effect July 1.

The additional money would be spent in keeping with a top Perdue priority, and a worthy priority it is -- making sure North Carolina's worst budget crisis in decades does as little damage as possible to the public schools and thus to the young people entrusted to them.

As to which taxes should go up, and which taxpayers should take the hit, Perdue was being discreet. Perhaps too much so. This is the General Assembly's call to make, true enough, but the real challenge for everyone caught in such a budget pickle is to make the hard, specific choices.

Perdue's original March budget plan did envision raising the cigarette tax by $1 a pack and putting another 5 percent levy on alcoholic beverages. That would have brought in an additional $400 million. But since then, the budget situation has grown much uglier.

It was the state House that took a run at fashioning a budget balanced solely on the strength of spending cuts -- cuts that Perdue was not alone in finding intolerable. When the House recently passed its budget bill, it called for new taxes totaling $780 million. The big-ticket increases would be in sales and income taxes.

But the Senate, which has the third seat at this poker table, could be holding the best hand. That's because its revenue approach would lower some tax rates, an important consideration for the state's economic competitiveness, while broadening the tax base. Several kinds of service transactions would trigger a sales tax. Changes of that sort deserve a careful evaluation on fairness grounds, but the principle is a useful one. It could help make the state's revenue situation more stable while also addressing the current emergency.

Even if taxes are hiked by $1 billion or so, that would leave plenty of ground still to make up to balance a budget with a $4.7 billion shortfall. Many programs would be whacked and jobs would be lost.

Yet if school class sizes can be kept from growing and teachers' jobs can be preserved, that would at least help the state's young people stay on track during a time when the importance of a good education to one's prospects in life could hardly be clearer. Perdue's latest take on
taxes, in line with the consensus among her Democratic colleagues in the House and Senate, makes that point in persuasive fashion.

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