

I-40 at Greensboro to revert to old route

September 18, 2008

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The News & Observer
Raleigh, NC

GREENSBORO - A new 7.5-mile stretch of Interstate 40 around Greensboro was heralded as saving time and lives when the eight-lane bypass opened in February. It pulled thousands of cars and trucks out of a polluted, crash-prone corridor known as Death Valley -- a crawling confluence of major highways crammed into six and sometimes four lanes.

But bewildered I-40 drivers complained about getting lost as they zoomed around Greensboro's Urban Loop. And suburban homeowners grouched about lost sleep as the thunder of I-40 trucks shook their windows.

Last week, DOT said it heard their pain, and announced it would shift I-40 traffic back through Death Valley, which had been renamed Business 40.

"We have heard the concerns of our citizens, and this plan should resolve motorists' confusion and reduce the noise levels for residents," Doug Galyon of Greensboro, chairman of the state Board of Transportation, said in a news release announcing the change.

The Greensboro loop will continue to carry other interstate traffic, including the southern arc of Interstate 85 that opened a few years ago. The western section of the Urban Loop will keep the name of Interstate 73 -- a new route that is to one day stretch from Michigan to South Carolina.

Blue Interstate 40 shields will replace Death Valley's green Business 40 signs by the end of the year, and exit numbers will change. Switching the signs will cost about \$300,000.

"We know we're going to take some hits for this, but we still think it's the best thing to do," said Mike Mills, DOT division engineer for the Greensboro area.

There was more than community good will at stake when DOT reversed its I-40 decision.

The 15-mile Death Valley route lost its eligibility for interstate maintenance funds -- a major federal money source -- when it was renamed Business 40.

Now, for repairs and other maintenance on Business 40, Mills must draw on a separate paving fund that already is stretched thin, with \$19 million a year to cover 6,500 non-interstate miles in his five-county jurisdiction.

The prospect of reclaiming those lost highway maintenance dollars arose in July, when state and federal officials conferred the new I-73 designation on part of Greensboro's bypass.

With I-40 running through the city and I-73 and I-85 routed around it, DOT will keep its federal funding for the loop and become eligible again for money to maintain the Death Valley route.

"We could not have done that if I-73 had not come down," Mills said. "There would be no way to make the switch."

Residents near the noisy western section cheered DOT's about-face. But there was no guarantee that their sleep will improve, Mills said. Switching road signs may not divert much of the Urban Loop traffic back through Death Valley.

By the time FedEx opens a new hub near Greensboro's airport next year, Mills said, "I don't think there will be much traffic reduction at all."

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