

Thursday, August 9, 2007

New loop section to ease city congestion

By Taft Wireback
twireback@news-record.com
News-Record.com
Greensboro, NC

The railroad came through tiny Greensboro in the mid-19th century, providing access that ultimately made it a substantial city and home to some of America's more successful corporations.

This year, a transportation event is taking place with similar potential for lifting the region to another level of size and influence: Greensboro and state government are opening a major section of the city's western Urban Loop this fall.

"It's the kind of thing that puts you a little closer to the rest of the world," said Steve Andrie, a program officer with the national Transportation Research Board in Washington. "You'll likely get some explosive development with that much new access."

The section of loop opening this year is the linchpin in a massive project that eventually will ring Greensboro, encompass four interstates, stand in close proximity to a fifth, and make the Piedmont Triad more accessible to hundreds of communities across the Midwest, Northeast and Southeast.

The new section of loop -- tentatively scheduled to open in late November -- girdles the city from just northwest of Piedmont Triad International Airport to Interstate 85 and existing parts of the loop southwest of town.

It will become the new route for through traffic on Interstate 40, then will link with I-85 for the interstates' paired journey east to the Triangle.

But just as important, that same span of western loop is likely to host new Interstate 73, planned to run between northern Michigan and the South Carolina coast. And the western loop will be relatively close to yet another new superhighway -- Interstate 74 from Iowa to Myrtle Beach, S.C.

On Greensboro's other side, the loop eventually will tie into I-785, scheduled to link the Triad with Danville, Va. Portions of the loop also will take another route number -- I-840.

One section of the eastern loop is scheduled for construction in 2011, from Burlington Road to U.S. 29, which is the future I-785. The last two sections of loop across northern Greensboro are not on the drawing board yet.

But just the western section of the loop opening late this year will have a big impact on the city, said Mike Mills, division engineer for the state Department of Transportation.

Its first benefit will be to reduce congestion in "death valley" -- a moniker for a segment of I-40/Business 85 through Greensboro that, because of an outdated design, is prone to wrecks. When the western loop opens, this old route will become Business 40/85.

"Getting that section of the loop open will take a bunch of I-40 traffic out of the 'valley,' " Mills said.

Andrle said smart local officials work to maximize economic benefits from huge transportation projects such as the loop by careful planning at interchanges to limit congestion and urban sprawl.

Greensboro officials are already thinking of such issues, said Tyler Meyer, planning director for the city Department of Transportation. But Meyer said new growth might be limited at interchanges by dense development that already exists near many of them.

That isn't to minimize the overall importance of the Urban Loop, Meyer said. In the end, he said, it is at least equal to the gigantic FedEx hub being built at PTI, which will use the new loop extensively.

"At its most basic level, it affects how people get around every day," he said. "So it's impact is huge."

The loop will ...

- * Serve as a relocated route for Interstate 40 through much of Guilford County
- * Carry traffic from both I-40 and I-85 south of the city
- * Eventually link to Interstate 785 (now U.S. 29)
- * Be within 20 miles of the new Interstate 74 that connects Winston-Salem and High Point
- * Likely handle a portion of the new Interstate 73 from near Piedmont Triad International Airport to the current U.S. 220 that heads south toward Asheboro State Safety Laws
- * Headlights must be turned on when windshield wipers are in use, between sunset and sunrise, and when visibility is 400 feet or less.
- * Speeding in a work zone carries a \$250 fine.

* A blood-alcohol concentration of 0.08 percent is grounds for conviction in North Carolina.

* Drivers and all passengers, in the rear seat as well as in the front seat, ages 16 and older must wear their seatbelts.

* Children must ride in a safety or booster seat until age 8 or they top 80 pounds, whichever comes first. They must ride in the back seat, unless there is no back seat or the safety seat is designed for use with air bags.

* Children under 8 are banned from ATVs; those 9 to 16 are limited to smaller, less powerful models. ATVs are banned from public streets.