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Road of uncertainty: The proposed I-785 corridor

By Gerald Witt
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With another interstate, local politicians thought they had a way to strengthen Greensboro's status as a transportation hub.

Nearly nine years ago, legislators labeled U.S. 29 from Greensboro to Danville, Va., as THE "Future I-785 Corridor."

Its backers said that I-785's connection to Interstate 40/85 would be safer and faster and would help generate commerce in areas hit by layoffs.

Since June 1998, when those Future I-785 signs went up, not much else has happened to make it an interstate.

There are no federal or state funds for the upgrade, which N.C. Department of Transportation officials say could cost \$200 million.

Meanwhile, accidents occur where U.S. 29 needs widening in Greensboro, people have died while trying to walk across the highway and economic developers use the future I-785 designation with little promise that it may ever happen.

In 1997, the idea of making U.S. 29 an interstate began when government and business leaders from North Carolina and Virginia lobbied federal lawmakers to designate the corridor.

A year later, then-Rep. Richard Burr, R-Winston-Salem, and Rep. Virgil Goode, R-Va., unveiled "Future I-785 Corridor" signs along the route.

Back then, a DOT official estimated that the upgrade would cost nearly \$100 million.

Now, that total would be doubled, says Mike Stanley, the department's transportation improvement program coordinator for the state's central region. He covers the Triad, Chapel Hill, Durham, Raleigh and areas south.

Stanley and federal transportation officials said they know of no current or past feasibility studies on upgrading U.S. 29.

Interstates are designed to speed transportation and improve safety with wide shoulders and flattened grades. Driveways are cut off, and side roads cross over or under the interstate and connect at exits.

In Greensboro, where cars regularly speed past at 60 mph, neighborhoods tightly border U.S. 29. Some streets connect directly to the highway, and there are few areas to pull off in an emergency.

Sgt. Wayne Scott of the Greensboro Police Department said the lack of a hazard lane causes many accidents.

"If you're on I-85 and you blow a tire, you have a shoulder to pull onto," he said. "On 29, you have a barrier wall on the right side and a shoulder of a foot and a half on the left."

Some even dare to cross the road on foot, he said.

Between 1997 and 2002, at least four pedestrians died while crossing U.S. 29 near McKnight Mill Road. Then the state built a walkway nearby.

Since 2002, Greensboro police and Highway Patrol records show that at least nine people died in accidents in Guilford County on U.S. 29. Two were pedestrians.

Although Guilford's focus is on safety, Rockingham's focus is more economic: An interstate there could help bring jobs to an area that has experienced mass layoffs since the late 1990s, when textile and tobacco facilities began to close.

Economic developers mention the county's major highways — U.S. 29 in the east and U.S. 220 in the west — to lure new industry. Portions of both roads are expected to be interstates someday.

Manufacturers often look for sites within 10 miles or 10 minutes of an interstate, Rockingham County Manager Tom Robinson said.

"Well, we don't even pop up on the list," he said.

What does pop up on the state's list are plans to turn U.S. 220 into an interstate and finish the Greensboro outer loop. Funding for I-785 goes ignored.

Congress is pushing Interstate 73/Interstate 74, from Ohio to South Carolina along the existing U.S. 220, Stanley said. The Greensboro outer loop will connect from U.S. 29 to U.S. 70, and from there to I-85.

The northeast section, U.S. 29 to U.S. 70, is scheduled for land acquisition in 2009, with construction to begin in 2011 at an estimated cost of \$117 million.

Legislators said they still support building I-785.

"The Interstate 785 project offers great prospects for economic development in the U.S. 29 corridor," Burr, who is now a senator, said in an e-mail. "I am working actively with the U.S. Department of Transportation and my colleagues in the Senate to find opportunities to fund this project."

U.S. Rep. Brad Miller, whose district includes the highway corridor, has not sought money for the road, said spokeswoman LuAnn Canipe, who searched back to 2004.

Goode said he hopes to lobby for the project between now and the next federal transportation bill, two years away.

To become a reality, I-785 will need significant state funding, transportation officials said. That pits it against all other needs statewide.

"The resources just simply aren't keeping up," Stanley said.

In North Carolina, where areas around the Triad, Charlotte and Raleigh compete for road money to handle exploding populations, he said, a project such as I-785 may be a long way off.

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