

Toll road could be the answer for Yadkin bridge replacement

By Eric C. Deines

edeines@independenttribune.com

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SALISBURY - If given the OK by local and state governments, a toll road project to replace the Yadkin River Bridge on Interstate 85 could begin as soon 2010.

But transportation leaders at a Rowan County transportation summit on Wednesday said that will take an extraordinary amount of coordination and agreement from a few groups.

At Wednesday's meeting, leaders representing Cabarrus, Rowan and Davidson counties received a presentation from Grady Rankin, chief financial officer of the North Carolina Turnpike Authority, who said a toll road could pay for the \$391 million project after 40 years.

Phil Conrad, executive director of the Cabarrus-Rowan Planning, said the bridge is No. 7 on the American Automobile Association's list of substandard bridges and causes a bottleneck for northbound traffic when it shrinks I-85 from four lanes to two lanes.

"This is the first time we've seen the report from the Turnpike Authority," Conrad said. "There are a lot of factors that play into (the possible toll project)."

In the 30 years, Conrad said congestion on the Cabarrus-Rowan portion of I-85 is expected to increase by 50 percent.

Currently, the bridge project is unfunded by the N.C. Department of Transportation.

"That's an unknown, because this division is not allocated sufficient money to build this bridge," said Nancy Dunn, an NCDOT board member. "To pay for this project would take more money than we get in a seven-year (Transportation Improvement Plan)."

The Cabarrus-Rowan MPO and the state legislature would both have to approve the project before work could begin.

Rankin said his organization would use a "cashless" toll that registers travelers by using license plates or through a statewide registration in the program.

This kind of toll keeps traffic moving at regular speeds and reduces the capital and operating costs of a toll station.

Rankin did note that many cars and large trucks would try to avoid a toll by using an alternate route. He said a consultants' study indicated 3,600 "heavy trucks" a day would use a detour through the town of Spencer.

"I used it this morning just so I would have the experience," Rankin said. "Diversion is a fact of life in a toll project."

Rankin said there are about five other toll road projects in the works around the state.

The NCDOT has other regional I-85 improvements on its radar.

A \$242.3 million project to widen I-85 from Interstate 485 to N.C. 73 has been slated for construction in 2011.

The next widening project for I-85 would stretch from N.C. 73 to N.C. 29, but to date, is unfunded in TIP. Concord officials have said that component of the I-85 widening is just as important as the first project.

This week, Cabarrus County economic development officials commented on the lack of distribution-focused companies that seek out locations in the area.

Ryan McDaniels, director of economic development with the Economic Development Corp., said at the group's board meeting Tuesday that a small amount of distribution recruitment was telling of road infrastructure issues in the area.

- Contact Eric C. Deines: 704-789-9141