

## I-95 study seeks input from residents

By Mike Hixenbaugh  
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The N.C. Department of Transportation has hired two consultants to study Interstate 95 to determine what fixes are needed along the highway and how best to pay for the upgrades.

Tolling parts of the 182-mile stretch of interstate is one of the funding models under serious consideration, officials said.

Built in the 1950s, large-scale rehabilitation and widening along the four-lane interstate has been minimal compared to other major roadways, N.C. DOT Project Planning Engineer Kristine O'Connor said.

"A lot of trucks drive up and down I-95 every day, and it gets worn," O'Connor said. "It's past time for some improvements."

Baker Engineering and PBS&J will work together on the I-95 Corridor Planning and Finance Study, which will serve as a master plan for development on the highway that connects Rocky Mount to New York and Florida.

Whatever improvements are proposed along I-95, local officials said they want a say in the process. Mayor David Combs considers the highway a lifeblood of economic development in the region.

"I do travel I-95 occasionally, and it's so different from traveling I-40," Combs said. "I feel safer on I-40. It's wider and it just seems much safer."

Between 2006 and 2009, the N.C. Highway Patrol reported more than 600 accidents on I-95 in Nash County. Thirteen people died in the wrecks.

"I'd love to see the interstate widened for that reason," Combs said.

That's exactly the type of input the state is looking for, N.C. DOT Communications Director Greer Beaty said.

Seeking comments and concerns from the public is a major part of the highway study, Greer said.

"This is the first time we've sought opinions from the public on the front-end (of planning)," Beaty said. "The department is engaging the public and communities all along 95 to find out what they want to get out of this."

The study, which is to be completed by the fall of 2011, will consider traffic patterns and projected growth along the interstate to determine where to widen the roadway and if new exits or overpasses are necessary.

To pay for the project, one of the recommendations from a 2008 legislative transportation committee was to toll motorists.

Other sources of funding for the improvements could include the State Highway Fund, a local-option sales tax or public-private partnerships.

Tolling offers a more expedient funding model, Beaty said, but she understands some residents might be opposed to the idea.

"Ultimately, we want to hear from the people," Beaty said. "We want people to be engaged now and to take ownership of this project."

The study will not directly result in construction projects once it's complete, but would rather serve as a master plan for smaller projects along the interstate.

Residents interested in commenting on potential improvements along Interstate 95 can visit [www.driving95.com](http://www.driving95.com).