

The Wilson Times

Saturday, April 03, 2010 12:25 AM

UPGRADING I-95: Study could lead to big changes for interstate

DOT: 'Tell us how you use this road'

By Stephanie Creech | Times Managing Editor

The N.C. Department of Transportation is embarking upon a two-year study of Interstate 95, a move that could signal big changes for the major north-south corridor that runs through Wilson County.

DOT officials want to hear from residents, business and government leaders about their concerns and ideas related to I-95 as part of what's being called "Driving 95: What's Your View." The idea is to engage people in the process from the beginning instead of DOT officials rolling out plans then seeking input.

"Tell us how you use this road," said Greer Beaty, communications director for DOT.

As different information is collected and portions of the study completed, it will be posted on a Web site devoted to the project. The Web site, www.driving95.com, recently went live. During the fall of 2011, DOT officials will come back to communities along the corridor to present what they've heard and what they've learned during the study.

Exactly what changes will be made to I-95 are not known. It could be widened to include six lanes then eight lanes of traffic by 2035. Acceleration and deceleration lanes could be lengthened to give motorists more time to gain speed or slow down at interchanges. Bridge heights and existing interchanges will be evaluated.

Kristine O'Connor, project planning engineer with the Project Development and Environmental Analysis Branch of DOT, said definitely something needs to be done to address safety and capacity issues.

I-95 is at capacity in terms of the number of vehicles traveling on it each day, officials said. Craig Young, transportation planning engineer and project manager for Michael Baker Engineering of Cary, said when I-95 was built it was not envisioned to carry the amount of truck traffic it does today. Because the highway was not designed to carry that many vehicles, vehicles move slower, Young said.

Michael Baker Engineering and PBS&J are two firms DOT hired to conduct the \$6.4 million study.

During 2008, the maximum average annual daily traffic volume on I-95 in North Carolina was 50,000 vehicles while the minimum average annual daily traffic volume for the year was 29,000 vehicles. The average maximum and minimum has grown from 41,600 vehicles and 24,200 vehicles, respectively, in 1989, according to information provided by DOT.

During the study, existing traffic patterns on I-95 will be forecasted out for the next 30 years.

The highway is a major link among states along the East Coast from Florida to Maine. Construction of I-95 started in 1957. The highway runs an estimated 1,917 miles from the Canadian border to where it meets U.S. 1 in Florida, according to the U.S. Department of Transportation. Roughly 182 miles of I-95 are in North Carolina.

Since I-95 was constructed work has mainly focused on pavement preservation and the installation of guard rails, said Derrick Lewis, Feasibility Studies Unit head for the Program Development Branch of DOT.

A few bridges in the southern end of the state have been replaced after being struck during traffic accidents.

Crash data provided by DOT shows that between Sept. 1, 2006 and Aug. 31, 2009, a total of 4,328 vehicle accidents occurred on I-95 in North Carolina between the South Carolina and Virginia state lines. Of those 4,328 accidents, 70 were fatalities. During the same time period, a total of 236 accidents were reported on I-95 in Wilson County and four were fatalities.

Beaty said North Carolinians define place by I-95 as the highway marks the divide between the Piedmont and the Coastal Plain.

Plus, being able to move agricultural and manufactured goods from place to place on I-95 is important to companies along the corridor. O'Connor said it could have a major effect on the population and the economy if people started avoiding I-95. O'Connor said some people are concerned about I-95 being forsaken for I-85. But O'Connor said I-85 serves different areas and needs than I-95 does.

There are sections of I-85 that have four lanes of traffic in either direction at this time, Young said.

The interchange at I-95 and U.S. 264 in Wilson has over the years become a development hub with restaurants, hotels, service stations and other businesses that cater to people passing through Wilson County.

In the late 1990s, the city of Wilson and Wilson County wanted DOT to build a new interchange at I-95 and Hornes Church Road. Residents in that area opposed it. The idea resurfaced in 2008 when Wilson Chamber of Commerce officials proposed it to DOT officials, again. But the project has never been funded.

In 2008, Bruce Beasley, chamber president, described the Hornes Church Road interchange as "critical to providing adequate transportation service to businesses and the public in the northwest portion of our community."

The cost of the I-95 study will be funded through DOT's budget, according to O'Connor. She said North Carolina is ahead of the curve in terms of other states when it comes to studying and upgrading I-95.

In January 2009, North Carolina was one of five states to sign what's known as the I-95 Corridor of the Future Development Agreement with the U.S. Department of Transportation. The agreement commits the states to reconstructing and expanding a 1,054-mile stretch of I-95 from Virginia to Florida. By signing the agreement, North Carolina officials have access to federal credit assistance and tolling programs. The four other states that signed the agreement were South Carolina, Virginia, Georgia and Florida.

O'Connor said Virginia and South Carolina are waiting to see the outcome of North Carolina's study. Once the study is completed, the actual improvements will be prioritized and funding options considered.

Beaty said improvements addressing safety issues are top priority.

Funding options for the improvements range from traditional tax revenue to federal funding to design-build financing to public-private partnerships. The possibility of an open-road tolling system will also be considered.

After the study is completed, environmental documentation and design work has to be done for each project. O'Connor said there is no timeline beyond the study for when improvements will be made.

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Interstate 95 traffic accidents	Interstate 95 average annual daily traffic volume			
	N.C. CORRIDOR:	WILSON COUNTY	JOHNSTON COUNTY	NASH COUNTY
I-95 from South Carolina line to Virginia line between Sept. 1, 2006 and Aug. 31, 2009	1990	1990	1990:	1990
Total crashes: 4,328	Max: 34,700 vehicles	Max: 24,000 vehicles	Max: 30,200	Max: 28,800
Fatal: 70	Min: 18,200 vehicles	Min: 22,400	Min: 22,400	Min: 23,900
Johnston County	1995	1995	1995:	1995
Total crashes: 213	Max: 44,500 vehicles	Max: 32,900	Max: 40,700	Max: 36,500
Fatal: 2	Min: 28,200 vehicles	Min: 30,800	Min: 29,100	Min: 32,700
Wilson County	2000	2000	2000	2000
Total crashes: 236	Max: 50,000 vehicles	Max: 32,000	Max: 50,000	Max: 38,000
Fatal: 4	Min: 28,000 vehicles	Min: 30,000	Min: 30,000	Min: 32,000
Nash County	2005	2005	2005	2005
Total crashes: 601	Max: 53,000 vehicles	Max: 34,000	Max: 53,000	Max: 39,000
Fatal: 13	Min: 32,000 vehicles	Min: 32,000	Min: 32,000	Min: 33,000
	2008	2008	2008	2008
	Max: 50,000	Max: 33,000	Max: 50,000	Max: 38,000
	Min: 29,000	Min: 29,000	Min: 29,000	Min: 32,000

Want to hear more?

Any civic or community group interested in having someone from

DOT speak about the I-95 study,
should contact Beaty at 919-733-2522
or gbbesty@ncdot.gov.

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