

Garden Parkway faces many uncertainties

[Michael Barrett](#)

August 6, 2008 - 7:59PM

A celebration might be in order when the first leg of the Garden Parkway opens, possibly by 2015.

But local and state elected officials said Wednesday they fear the toll road could spur new traffic concerns.

The parkway initially will only run from I-485 in Charlotte to U.S. 321 south of Gastonia. Many more years could pass before the next leg is built to I-85 near Bessemer City.

That could be bad news for U.S. 321 traffic through the heart of Gastonia.

"To be honest with you, I was not aware they were going to stop there (at U.S. 321)," said N.C. Rep. William Current, R-Gaston, during a meeting on the project at the Gaston County Police Department. "One of the purposes of this toll road is to keep the trucks from going up and down the middle of Gastonia."

The N.C. Turnpike Authority held the session to update public officials on the parkway's status. It preceded two workshops - geared toward residents - to be held in Gaston County today and Monday.

Attendants on Wednesday learned about the 12 potential parkway routes that have been narrowed down. They also discussed the project's other numerous uncertainties.

Much of the talk was positive. Two decades have passed since the need for the Garden Parkway was first touted, as officials struggled to find a way to pay for it.

But the General Assembly this year approved \$35 million a year in the "gap funding" necessary to make construction of the first leg possible.

It is one of five toll roads that have been approved for construction across the state.

"Now the funding piece is in place and we can move forward," said Bob Spencer, a member of the turnpike authority board of directors. "Our goal is to expedite this environmental process so we can start building."

Completing the draft environmental impact statement on the project by January would represent a "huge milestone," said Jennifer Harris, the turnpike authority's lead engineer. That would make it easier to start construction by late 2010.

Engineers have already had to consider kinks, such as how best to get around Duke Energy's Allen Steam Station in Belmont. The more than 20-mile-long parkway also cannot infringe on any historic properties.

One proposed route would require 10 parking spaces to be removed at Forestview High

School, and call for a section of Union Road to be relocated, said program manager Jill Gurak.

"Through this whole area, there are numerous subdivisions and neighborhoods," she said, "and we've tried our best to minimize the effects on those in narrowing down these designs."

Though funding hasn't been found to extend the parkway from U.S. 321 west to I-85, engineers are preparing as if it has. The environmental impact statement will address the entire route.

No plans are on the horizon to extend the parkway from I-85 northeast to Dallas, as local officials originally hoped. But Gurak said options will remain for doing that in the future.

Commissioner Joe Carpenter said the strain that will be placed on U.S. 321 when the parkway's first section is finished should concern everyone. It should motivate elected officials here to continue fighting to find more state dollars, he said.

"We're not through with this," he said. "We've got to keep the pressure where it needs to be put."

You can reach Michael Barrett at 704-869-1826.