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Transportation needs carry jolting price tag

It's estimated that Huntersville will need about \$650 million over the next two decades.

Kevin Cary

kcary@charlotteobserver.com

Posted: Sunday, Aug. 24, 2008

HUNTERSVILLE A Huntersville official estimates it will cost \$650 million to fulfill the town's transportation needs by 2030.

Bill Coxe, the town's transportation planner, gave the estimate at a town board meeting Monday night. Coxe, who has been involved in transportation for more than 30 years, says that figure is a "wild guess" based on only a few days of research. But it didn't come from thin air.

"These are really scary numbers," Coxe said. "My point to the board is the number is very large, no matter what the number is. The town really has to get serious and prioritize what it is going to do."

Coxe made the estimate to a regional transportation board earlier this month and said that figure doesn't include the widening of Interstate 77 or the cost to construct the North Corridor commuter rail. He said the figure might be high, because it doubles the current construction estimates for some roads, but he added that construction costs have risen 95 percent since 2004.

Coxe said he listed 31 individual projects on his estimate and also had other sets of projects involving Exits 23 and 25 off I-77. The proposal also includes 100 miles of bikeways and 60 miles of greenways. He said the proposal did not include money for sidewalks.

Commissioner Charles Jeter questioned whether Coxe's projects were all necessary.

"Are these pie-in-the-sky dream projects?" he said. "I am sure there is probably at least \$100 million worth of necessary projects or more. But we don't have all the money in the world to handle all of this."

Commissioner Ron Julian said the town should not fund improvements for state roads and should try to get more state and federal grants. Huntersville recently received a \$1.4 million grant from the federal government, and Julian said the town might receive a \$5 million grant soon.

Coxe said the town shouldn't consider a "bare-minimum" plan and also should adapt if the state doesn't improve its roads in a timely fashion. Those delays were a primary reason Huntersville decided to fund as much as \$25 million for N.C. 73 improvements.

Julian said Coxe's estimate wasn't a shock because of Huntersville's rapid growth.

"It wasn't a jolt to hear those numbers," Julian said. "We know we are behind the 8-ball a little. Can we catch up?"

Kevin Cary: 704-987-3670, ext. 33



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