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## Outerbelt opening faces further delays

**The section in northeast Mecklenburg won't be ready Friday as hoped, and the contractor won't say when it will be.**

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Posted: Wednesday, Oct. 29, 2008

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The outerbelt in northeast Mecklenburg won't open Friday as hoped, and the contractor won't give a finish date for the 5.5-mile segment.

Virginia Beach-based Skanska said earlier this month that it planned to open the segment by the end of October, weather permitting. At a press conference Friday morning, Skanska said rain and cold weather have caused delays.

The contractor still needs to make cuts in the concrete and seal them. Crews also need to stripe much of the highway, and lay additional asphalt on some of the on and off ramps.

"We are just as frustrated as you are," said Joe Raynor, a Skanska project manager.

Raynor said Skanska is close to finishing the segment, from N.C. 16 to N.C. 115. But he refused to offer a new timeline for when it could be finished. When asked if the cold weather could conceivably delay the project's completion until the spring, Raynor wouldn't comment.

He said the sawing and sealing of concrete needs to be done when it's warmer than 40 degrees. Striping should be done when it's 50 degrees or warmer, he said.

Mark Hubbard, a Skanska spokesman, said rain has also caused delays.

While Tuesday was unseasonably cold, the temperature in Charlotte has dropped below 40 degrees only four times this month. Those were overnight lows, and the temperature pushed past 50 degrees by mid-morning.

October also has been drier than usual. Monthly rainfall has been less than normal, and it has rained three times in October, according to the Web site, weather.com.

When finished, the segment will mean the outerbelt is nearly finished, and it will connect to Interstate 77 in north Mecklenburg for the first time. The only piece remaining to be built will

connect N.C. 115 to I-85 in northeast Mecklenburg. That's scheduled to start construction in 2015, though the N.C. Department of Transportation has said it could be built sooner.

This section of I-485 was supposed to open in the spring of 2007.

Skanska contends that when it tried to begin work on the road, it found the state hadn't bought of all the land, and hadn't moved utilities that were in the way. The N.C. DOT has admitted it shares some of the blame, but said some of the delays are Skanska's fault.

The two sides are fighting over who will pay the cost overruns on the \$94 million project.

Jen Thompson, spokeswoman for the N.C. DOT, said the state is pushing Skanska to finish, but it can't control the contractor's schedule.

"We can't make any assessment about damages until the project is done, and we accept it," Thompson said.

Thompson said the DOT added some work to the project, such as improvements to N.C. 115 for a planned car dealership and along W.T. Harris Boulevard for commercial development.

"But that's not a year's worth of work," she said. "It's maybe three months."

Hubbard said that if it's not too cold or wet, he's certain the road will be finished "in time for people to do holiday shopping at Northlake Mall."

The outerbelt will run just north of the mall.



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