



Cities resist taking on state roads

By Ray Gronberg : The Herald-Sun

gronberg@heraldsun.com

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DURHAM -- A study commissioned by the General Assembly's leaders appears likely to recommend asking North Carolina's cities to pick up more of the tab for maintaining the state's roads.

Staff members of the Legislature's "21st Century Transportation Committee" are focusing specifically on 5,000 miles of state-maintained roads that lie within city borders but aren't a part of the interstate, U.S. or formal N.C. route systems.

If they get their way, the job of maintaining state-owned streets in Durham such as East Club Boulevard and Cornwallis Road would go to a city government that's acknowledged having trouble keeping up with its own street-paving needs. The city already owns and maintains 659 miles of streets.

Other cities would face the same problem -- and already are lining up against the idea.

The study group's emerging plan "would be a practical and financial disaster for cities," Raleigh City Manager Russell Allen said Monday in an e-mail to officials across the state. "Under no circumstances do cities want the responsibility for these roads, no matter how the proposal is structured.

Allen's e-mail quickly drew I-agree responses from Chapel Hill Town Manager Roger Stancil, Carrboro Town Manager Steve Stewart, Concord City Manager Brian Hiatt, Gastonia City Manager Jim Palenick and Wilson City Manager Grant Goings.

Durham City Manager Tom Bonfield's take isn't much different.

The state would be "giving us roads that in our case are pretty deplorable and saying, 'Now maintain them,'" he said in an interview. "The math doesn't work."

Still, it seems likely the proposal will go to the General Assembly early next year.

It's clear the study group "feels very strongly about the transfer of these miles," said Julie White, executive director of the N.C. Metropolitan Coalition.

The state government now owns and maintains 79,067 miles of paved roads -- more than any other U.S. state save Texas. The total represents 76 percent of all North Carolina road mileage.

State dominance of the highway program here stems from the Depression-era collapse of local-government finances. The General Assembly at that time agreed to take over county road programs.

But the N.C. Department of Transportation doesn't have enough money to maintain all the roads in its portfolio, and wants to focus what it has on the most important arteries.

"One way to do that is reduce the number of roads you're responsible for," said Mark Ahrendsen, Durham's transportation manager.

The General Assembly's Fiscal Research Division, meanwhile, thinks city governments can step up.

Property taxes here, they note, are significantly lower than the U.S. average. Residents of Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, Texas and Virginia all pay more. Property-tax-paid contributions to road maintenance are lower here than the norm.

Study group members are discussing ways to subsidize the transition, but some city managers suspect that's just window-dressing.

If state leaders thought "sufficient maintenance money would be available in the future, I doubt they would be looking for cities to take over the responsibility," Goings said.

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