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Charlotte projects languish; N.C. pours \$270 million into Fayetteville roads

Fayetteville is outgoing transportation secretary's hometown

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Slideshow




Transportation Secretary Lyndo Tippet

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RALEIGH The N.C. Board of Transportation is pumping \$270 million in road money into Fayetteville, the hometown of Transportation Secretary Lyndo Tippet and of a key legislative ally, weeks before Tippet leaves office.

The board approved the money for work on a highway loop around Fayetteville during meetings in October and November, as road money has been drying up and cash for Charlotte's outerbelt and loops around other cities has been delayed.

The funding comes in the waning weeks of the terms of Gov. Mike Easley, a Democrat, and Tippet, his appointee. Tippet is also a close friend of Senate Majority Leader Tony Rand, a Fayetteville Democrat who pushed for the loop money.

The move has officials in other cities up in arms.

"I don't know what their personal roles are," Raleigh Mayor Charles Meeker said, "but I know what the end result is."

Meeker, also a Democrat, said highway money has flowed to Fayetteville in recent years as most large cities in the state have received little.

Rep. Becky Carney, a Charlotte Democrat and a co-chair of a legislative committee that oversees transportation, said approval of the Fayetteville project leapfrogs the state's larger cities and drains a large portion of the money available for the entire state.

"That would be a travesty," Carney said, "if the bulk of our loop money went for one project."

Tippett shrugged off the criticism, saying whoever doesn't get money is bound to complain. The Fayetteville project has been in the works for years, he said, and it's more important now that the Army's Fort Bragg is expanding.

"Those people who are going to the front lines are entitled to a safe commute," Tippett said, "as much as those going to their banking and industrial jobs in the rest of the state."

Nina Szlosberg, a member of the transportation board from Raleigh, said Gov.-elect Bev Perdue and her administration will have a depleted bank account for transportation projects when they take office in January.

"It's important for the new administration to have the opportunity to determine where best to put our transportation dollars," she said.

Perdue campaigned on a pledge to change the board of transportation into a policy-making group instead of one that approves specific road projects.

"Gov.-elect Perdue's goal is to prevent these types of disputes," said Perdue spokesman David Kochman, "by transforming the Department of Transportation, including prohibiting DOT board members from voting on specific projects."

Local officials across the state point out that the general pot of road money follows a set – though much-criticized – formula designed to make sure every region gets an equitable share. But no such equation determines where loop money is spent. Those decisions are made by transportation officials in Raleigh.

Delays, except in Fayetteville

Nancy Dunn, a transportation board member from Winston-Salem, said clear decision-making steps should be established. "There should be some known process on how the money is allocated on loops," she said.

Last year, Charlotte's unfinished Interstate 485 loop was pushed back by two years and now isn't expected to be completed for a decade.

Construction was supposed to start this year on a 12-mile section of Raleigh's outer loop, I-540, in western Wake County. In 2005, the Transportation Department postponed construction by at least four years and said it might take until 2030 or longer to finish the entire loop.

Fayetteville's loop, however, was kept on schedule.

The first leg of Fayetteville's loop opened three years ago and is handling about 9,000 cars a day. The southern leg of Charlotte's loop handles 120,000 cars a day.

When the state created a separate pot of money for urban loop projects in 1989, most of the money initially went to Charlotte as I-485 began to encircle the state's largest city.

The state has spent nearly \$1 billion on I-485 since 1990. Mecklenburg County's share of the state loop money has diminished in recent years as Raleigh, Greensboro and other cities have built or expanded loops.

"You've got the same amount of money with far more competition for the funding," Tippett said. "Nine communities would like their loops finished now."

Fayetteville was not included in the original list of cities for loops, but was added in 2003. Officials from other cities and some board members complain that it has now jumped to the head of the line.

Rand, the Senate majority leader, said Fayetteville was at the end of the line and the money has finally reached there.

"It's our turn now," Rand said.

Tippett argued that the military base closing and realignment process in 2005 shifted a major new command to Fort Bragg and the likelihood of additional jobs. Base commanders asked for various road improvements.

At the same time, the state was paying hundreds of millions of dollars in incentives to companies such as Dell and Google to move to the state and create new jobs.

"Spending \$200 or \$300 million in Fort Bragg infrastructure improvements seemed to be a deal at the time," Tippett said.

Staff writer Steve Harrison and (Raleigh) News & Observer writer Bruce Siceloff contributed.

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EastisBest wrote on 11/21/2008 01:28:30 PM:


Charlotte-Gastonia-Salisbury 2.2 mil; Raleigh-Durham-Cary 1.6 mil. The point is, people from Charlotte act like it's NYC or something. Really, Charlotte is not much bigger than Raleigh. I didn't make it up, that's the statistics. You've got a nice skyline, but you've isolated yourself from the rest of the state. Most of you just moan and gripe about the east. Get over it!

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secrules1 wrote on 11/21/2008 01:24:07 PM:

Fargit about it boys.....The Eastern 'good ol' boys' network is STILL alive and kicking. This is exactly WHY this state has GOT to elect a Gov. from the western side of the state, 'to set things aright'.....TO all of you Dumba\$\$e\$ that voted for Beverly.....and I'm talking about the Meck.Co. voters.....enjoy Fayetteville why don't you?

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