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## Yadkin River fix on bridge to nowhere

**State still seeking consensus on funding for I-85 structure.**

By Steve Harrison  
sharrison@charlotteobserver.com  
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Another year has passed, and one of the state's most critical transportation projects is no closer to being built.

Experts agree that replacing the Interstate 85 Yadkin River bridge is a priority, but there's no consensus about how the state should pay for the new span.

There was the possibility a year ago the bridge would be tolled and built by the N.C. Turnpike Authority. But there is stiff resistance in Rowan and Davidson counties, whose leaders don't think they should pay \$1 every time they cross the river, and who think a toll is double taxation. The General Assembly won't force a toll project upon an unwilling community, so that option is, for now, unlikely.

Late last year, President-elect Obama's stimulus package raised hopes that \$300million in new federal money could be funneled to the bridge. But that enthusiasm was squelched when the state said any federal money would be divvied up by the much-maligned equity formula, sprinkled throughout the state.

Now transportation officials are pinning their hopes on a second Obama stimulus package, perhaps late in the year. The other option is a Congressional earmark, which everyone hates unless you are the recipient.

All that is a long way of saying there is no plan.

Why has it been so hard to build something that North Carolina needs?

The Yadkin bridge, built in 1955, is safe, state engineers say. Part of its steel support structure was recently replaced, and the bridge is inspected regularly, according to the N.C. Department of Transportation.

(The precariousness of the state's old bridges was underscored last month when the state closed a section of U.S. 74 in Cleveland County because the DOT found a large crack in the support of a bridge over Sandy Run Creek.)

But the biggest problem with the Yadkin bridge is its width. The lanes are narrow and there are no shoulders. It carries 80,000 cars a day, which is near capacity for a four-lane highway.

I-85 is the state's economic lifeline, and closing even half of the bridge would strangle traffic flow between Charlotte and the Triad and Triangle.

A new eight-lane bridge has been in the local DOT's long-range plan since at least 1990. The inability to build the replacement is due, in part, to bad luck. It's also the result of a political protest that so far hasn't worked.

In 1990, the DOT thought building the bridge and widening I-85 would cost \$70million.

In 2004, the Board of Transportation was preparing to award the contract when the local DOT office pulled the project off the agenda. A local historian was concerned the new bridge would impact a historic Civil War crossing of the Yadkin, and the state decided to wait and study the issue.

"We weren't trying to stop the bridge; we were just talking about how and where they build it," said Salisbury historian Anne Brownlee, who noted that Yadkin crossing has been used by Native Americans and is rich in history.

A few months later, the DOT in Raleigh announced that its divisions would have to slash their budgets. Division 9 – which oversees the Yadkin bridge – made a fateful decision.

Instead of cutting a number of small and medium-sized projects, the division and Board of Transportation member Nancy Dunn yanked the bridge from the long-term transportation plan.

Because the cost of the bridge was growing – it was estimated at \$150million – the local DOT would have little money for anything else. The decision also was a protest. Surely the state would see the bridge was a project of “statewide significance” – and change the way it distributes highway money.

But for the past five years, there's been a lot of talk about the bridge. And no action.

Last month in Raleigh, Dunn brought up the Yadkin bridge again at the Board of Transportation meeting. The response from her colleagues: Crickets chirping.

Pat Ivey, the DOT division engineer who oversees the bridge, said he thought pulling the bridge from the local long-range plan would have forced the state to earmark money specifically for the bridge.

“We felt like the legislators and transportation officials would see there is something broken with the funding,” Ivey said. “I think that has occurred. All the panels recognize that. But the problem is so immense no one knows how to fix it.”

One reason no one is coming to the rescue is there are projects similar to the Yadkin bridge throughout the state. Other local DOT offices believe their projects too are of “statewide significance” and they don't want to pay for them out of their local highway budgets. Every corner of the state needs more highway money.

Ivey said in the next few years the Yadkin bridge will need a major rehab. There are small potholes on the deck of the bridge, and soon the state will remove all asphalt down to the steel deck.

That project will likely become the mother of all traffic jams. Ivey can only hope the rest of the state notices.

“We'll make it safe as long we need to,” Ivey said.

### **Sunday LYNX closures**

The Lynx Blue Line won't operate north of the Carson station today from 6:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. to allow construction of a pedestrian bridge in uptown.

The Charlotte Area Transit System will provide free connecting buses that will operate between the Carson station and the Charlotte Transportation Center (CTC)/Arena Station during this time.

If you are traveling southbound on the LYNX Blue Line this morning and early afternoon, board the connecting bus on Brevard Street at the Charlotte Transportation Center or at Brevard Street and Martin Luther King Boulevard in front of the AT&T building.

Arrive five minutes earlier than the published rail schedule to catch the bus to Carson Street Station.

Commuters traveling northbound today during this time can board the connecting bus on Carson Street for travel back into Center City. The bus will terminate at the CTC/Arena Station.



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