

## Economy puts brakes on road projects

By Jason deBruyn  
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&lt;i&gt;MONROE -- Roads might stay a little bumpier in 2009.&lt;/i&gt;

Because of a projected 15 percent shortfall in the annual N.C. Department of Transportation budget, local divisions are having to look at prioritizing projects.

"Out of an abundance of caution I thought it would be wise to pull back on some projects," Division 10 division engineer Barry Moose said Friday, though he added that a government stimulus has been discussed and would cover some of the budget shortfall.

There are 14 NCDOT divisions; Division 10, which includes Union County, received about \$72 million in funding last year and Moose fears the budget for fiscal year 2009/2010 could be about 15 percent smaller. He said he would have a better understanding of the exact budget figures after a meeting next week, but underscored that he wanted to be cautious moving forward, saying his management style is one of conservative caution when it comes to budget matters.

In Union County, a project that had been looked at by the NCDOT and approved by the Wesley Chapel Village Council was a re-alignment of the intersection of New Town and Cuthbertson roads.

Randy Bowers, a design engineer for Division 10, said the plan is to square the intersection and add a signal and turn lanes. The Wesley Chapel council passed a resolution in November supporting the change.

Although the NCDOT will likely have to slash projects, the Monroe bypass will not be cut out. The bypass will receive \$24 million annually in gap funding which the N.C. Turnpike Authority can leverage into bond revenues to fund the estimated \$700 million project.

The bond market is currently closed because of the financial meltdown, but is expected to be opened again by time the project seeks financing.

In January, the N.C. Turnpike Authority will submit its final route recommendation, an issue that has sparked debate over the past year, especially concerning the connector and routes through Indian Trail and Stallings.

Turnpike Authority Executive Director David Joyner said he wants to see the project pushed through quickly not only to ease travel on U.S. Highway 74 but also to stimulate the economy. Brian Deery, a senior director of highway and transportation with the Association of General Contractors of America projected the bypass project would create



*E-J staff photo by Rick Crider*

### *Happy home*

***One happy family, the Chambers can't conceal the exhilaration of their new home reaching completion, and just in time for Christmas. Venus Chambers reaches across her husband, Aaron to poke a bit of fun at their four year old son, Nicholas, after dedication ceremonies for the 54th Habitat for Humanity house. The house at 1816 Icemorlee Street was built with funds from the Habitat ReStore at 2520 West Roosevelt in Monroe. Habitat plans to start three new homes in January and needs volunteers.***

3,350 direct construction jobs, an additional 7,100 supplier jobs and have a multiplier effect meaning jobs affected by those workers spending money of an additional 10,500 jobs.

"That's why we're pushing hard in Washington to get funding for that project," Deery said. "It has so much more of a positive impact than, say, a rebate check."

Also, as with the Monroe airport expansion, bids in the current market would be much lower than during times of economic growth. Bids for the airport expansion came in less than half of the engineer's estimate and Joyner said that projects statewide have been bid at about 20 percent to 30 percent lower than engineers' estimates.

"I wish that we were ready to go," Joyner said. "We are doing everything possible we can here."

Financial and environmental studies, however, take time. "You just can't shortcut this stuff," Joyner said.

Once the preferred route is announced, however, more definitive answers can be given because analysts will be working with a constant. Joyner hoped to see major steps taken in 2009 after a route is determined.

The Providence Road expansion in Weddington will not be slowed because of any NCDOT shortfall as all approved and ongoing projects already have funding allocated, said NCDOT's Moose.

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