

Just like traffic, bridge is stuck

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The Daily Advance

Monday, August 4, 2014

CURRITUCK — The Mid-Currituck Bridge is like a beach-bound vacationer stuck in traffic for hours. Both don't know when they will start moving again.

Just two years ago, the project aimed at solving traffic gridlock for vacationers headed for the Outer Banks appeared to be moving toward construction.

Since then the Mid-Currituck Bridge has faced a series of major stops.

The proposed seven-mile span linking Currituck's mainland to Corolla lost financial backing in 2013 when the GOP-led Legislature withdrew state funds previously allocated for the project.

Area lawmakers and Currituck County officials had hoped to recoup the loss under the state's new highway funding formula, but scores released in May were disappointing.

"This isn't at all like we hoped," said 1st District state Rep. Bob Steinburg, R-Chowan.

Steinburg had been one of the optimists.

He told Currituck officials, nervous about funding changes, that the bridge would fare well under the state's Strategic Transportation Investments Program. He has since backed away from statements like the one he made to Currituck Republicans in March 2013 that "the Mid-Currituck Bridge is going to be built."

Steinburg said he based his statements on assurances from state Department of Transportation Secretary Anthony Tata, who was also apparently surprised at the outcome.

"Secretary Tata was hopeful that the project would score well at the statewide level during this round, based on congestion figures," said DOT spokeswoman Nicole Meister.

In reality, the Mid-Currituck Bridge's low score knocked it out of contention for state-level funding.

"The frustration we feel is that we are no closer today to a solution than we were when (NCDOT) began assessing the problem," said Currituck County Manager Dan Scanlon.

According to DOT, the bridge still has a chance to be funded at the regional or state level because the scoring process is not complete. Many local officials question how that's possible, however.

The bridge, estimated to cost \$173 million, far exceeds the \$44 million set aside for the 20-county region and \$32 million for the 14-county division, said DOT Division I Engineer Jerry Jennings.

DOT officials in Raleigh are still holding judgment nevertheless.

“We do realize that the large cost of the project makes funding at the regional or division level a challenge; however, it is premature to say whether a project will or will not be funded at this point,” Meister stated.

The Mid-Currituck Bridge has a more distant chance of moving forward.

Changes to the new state’s funding formula may help it score higher two years from now when projects can be resubmitted.

Steinburg said lawmakers dissatisfied with the state’s funding formula are likely to propose changes during the General Assembly’s January session.

DOT said it plans to review the scoring process.

“The department recognizes the new process is not perfect and that other factors may need to be considered in scoring calculations during the next round of prioritization,” said Meister.

In the meantime, an agreement between a private investor and the state to finance the project could fall apart.

Currituck Development Group, a limited liability company formed by Florida-based ACS Infrastructure Development Inc., signed a pact with the state to help build and maintain the toll bridge. Now that the state funding is uncertain, either party could cancel the contract. The agreement expires Dec. 31 and can be extended if both parties agree to it. At this point, the state owes Currituck Development about \$3.6 million in upfront services.

Thomas Pelnik, senior vice president for business development at ACS, said the company’s plans are on hold while the state decides how it wants to proceed with the project.

“We always keep an open mind. Some of these processes take a long time,” said Pelnik. “If they choose to proceed, we are ready and willing to help them.”

One state representative has suggested another funding option.

State Sen. Bill Cook, R-Beaufort, said he will be reaching out to large investors who may be interested in privately funding the project, presumably without state funds. However, former state Rep. Bill Owens, D-Pasquotank, maintained during his tenure that state funding was critical to keeping tolls low on the bridge.

Pelnik said public funding at some level remains a critical part to ACS’s participation in the bridge’s construction. Previously, the state had agreed to pay up to \$28 million a year in “gap funds” to offset construction costs and keep tolls down.

Delays for the Mid-Currituck Bridge could also add to nearly \$27 million the state has already spent to study, plan and design the span. The project’s Environmental Impact Statement released in 2012 will not expire but updates may be necessary, DOT stated.

Currituck and Dare counties have sought solutions for decades to traffic gridlock that officials fear will hurt the region's billion dollar tourism industry. Drive time on summer weekends is regularly quadrupled by traffic bottlenecks onto turns onto N.C. Highway 12 in Dare County. Cars caught in stop-and-go traffic on Saturdays especially may inch forward at a rate of 20 miles in two to three hours on a Saturday.

The Mid-Currituck Bridge was viewed as the region's top solution to the problem.

Just two years ago, the project appeared to be moving toward construction. In fact, the state's draft Environmental Impact Statement projected in 2010 that the seven-mile span across the Currituck Sound would be ready for traffic in late 2014.