

Bridge may have to compete for DOT funds

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CURRITUCK — If the proposed Mid-Currituck Bridge loses state “gap funds,” the \$660 million project may have to compete with other road projects in the region for funding.

To nab construction dollars, the bridge would have to rank high among top-priority highway projects under the state transportation department’s Transportation Improvement Program.

The project’s chances of being funded would depend on several factors, said Don Voelker, the Department of Transportation’s director of strategic prioritization.

Road congestion counts for 20 percent of a project’s score. The higher the traffic count, the higher the project scores. Improving road safety counts another 10 percent. The state looks at crash rates on the highway; the more accidents, the higher the points. Road conditions, time savings for drivers, and economic benefits to the region are factored as well.

One big chunk of the score depends on local support. Ranking by the Albemarle Rural Planning Organization and DOT’s Division 1 staff would comprise 30 percent of the project’s score.

Matt Wood, former member of the state Board of Transportation, said the Mid-Currituck Bridge would have no problem scoring high in local support.

Exactly how the Mid-Currituck Bridge might score in other areas is unknown, said Voelker. It’s never been run through the state formula because “gap funds” were appropriated by the General Assembly to cover its costs, he said.

Existing plans for financing the bridge call for private investors to build and maintain the bridge. State lawmakers have agreed to contribute up to \$28 million over the next 30 years to offset construction costs as a way of keeping tolls on the bridge from going too high.

Proposed legislation that would eliminate those gap funds could change the bridge’s funding options, however.

Some critics of the Mid-Currituck Bridge and other specially funded toll-road projects say the projects should have to compete for state dollars like all other road projects. New DOT Secretary Anthony Tata said he also favors the change. Cutting out the gap funds will require full approval by the General Assembly. So far, only the Senate has signed off on the change.

State Rep. Bob Steinburg, R-Chowan, said Tata has assured him the switch would not end chances the seven-mile span linking Currituck’s mainland to the Outer Banks would be constructed.

Steinburg said he was told by Tata the project would rank high under the state DOT’s prioritization system.

Wood said the score could depend on how much funding the project will seek in TIP funds. Building the entire project with TIP funds would be impossible, he said.

The entire budget for the 14-county Division 1 is \$600 million over seven years. The bridge alone would consume that entire budget unless it remains a toll road as originally proposed, Wood said. The state's pay-as-you-go funding system alone doesn't have enough up-front cash to pay for the construction project, he said.

The largest project currently funded under the TIP is the Bonner Bridge replacement at an estimated cost of \$215 million, said DOT's Division 1 Engineer Jerry Jennings.

The Mid-Currituck Bridge might have a chance if it were to remain a toll-road project with private investors paying for construction, Wood said. In that case, the TIP would need to pay the gap funds rather than the full construction cost.

That unconventional approach would probably require a law change, he added.

Even if the project were to make top priority, construction could be several years away. Under the existing system, new projects have a five-year waiting list.

Projects already funded for construction over the next five years go first. While awaiting funding, new top-scoring projects compete every two years for their rankings.

Steinburg said Tata never mentioned how soon the bridge might be constructed under the TIP.

Steinburg said he would vote to keep gap funds because construction is likely to start sooner under the existing set-up.

If the bridge was added to the state's new priorities, it would be competing with several other yet-unfinished projects. Also awaiting funding in Division 1 are widening projects along U.S. Highway 158 in several counties, including "Short Cut Road" in Camden and Currituck counties and a section near Morgan's Corner in Pasquotank County.

Already funded projects — including the widening of U.S. 158 in central Camden and the Camden Causeway Bridge and road improvements in Pasquotank County — are already locked in for continued funding.

Funding for the Mid-Currituck Bridge with state mobility funds may be another option, although apparently unlikely. The separate pool of money was created in 2010 to ease traffic congestion in urban areas.

In 2011, the entire project, estimated at that time to cost \$550,000, was run through the mobility fund's formula, which is different from the TIP formula. With a ranking of 74 out of 95 projects, the bridge project as proposed would not likely be funded, said Voelker.

The mobility fund weighs heavily in favor of metropolitan areas, Currituck County Manager Dan Scanlon said in a recent report. Top-scoring projects in 2011 came from Mecklenburg, Wake, Orange and Durham counties.