

Currituck uses video to pitch bridge

By Cindy Beamon
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COROLLA — Currituck officials fired back Tuesday with a new video aimed at countering state lawmakers' criticism of the proposed Mid-Currituck Bridge.

The first audience were members of the N.C. Department of Transportation Board, visiting Currituck for a first-hand look at the county's transportation problems.

Transportation Secretary Gene Conti said Currituck officials will also need to explain the bridge's benefits to lawmakers who have questioned why the state should pay \$28 million a year for the next 30 years for a seven-mile span joining Currituck's mainland to the Outer Banks.

"It's absolutely important to have people to show up and make their case," Conti said following Currituck's presentation.

The trip to Currituck was one of several the transportation board takes each year to see road problems across the state. The 19-member board can more easily understand Currituck's transportation challenges by seeing the problems first-hand rather than just hearing about them, said Jim Trogden, chief operating officer for NCDOT. The board assists the state in making decisions about road priorities and funding each year.

Recent criticism of the proposed Mid-Currituck Bridge and ferry services by lawmakers added to the urgency of Currituck's presentation.

A power shift in the General Assembly in 2010 has opened the project up to renewed scrutiny. For the past two years, the Republican-dominated Senate has sought to stall, cut or reduce funding for the project. Most recently, the Legislature's Transportation Oversight Committee has raised more questions. Bill Rabon, R-Brunswick, has said political "cronyism," presumably under the earlier leadership of Sen. Marc Basnight, D-Dare, allowed the project to advance without justifying the cost.

On Tuesday, Currituck commissioners, state Rep. Bill Owens, D-Pasquotank, and state Sen. Stan White, D-Dare, restated their arguments for the bridge — nothing new for a project that's had regional support for at least three decades, they said. Commissioner Paul O'Neal said bi-partisan support of the project across decades doesn't support Rabon's claims of political cronyism.

The new video gave a new spin to the old arguments, with testimony from tourists, a tourism expert, rescue workers, hurricane emergency officials, businesses and others.

Speaking on the bridge's behalf in the video was Judy Randall with Randall Travel Marketing, recently hired by the county to offer advice on growing tourism. Randall said without the bridge, tourists will drive to South Carolina beaches rather than face backups in Dare and Currituck counties.

"You are past the point of pain. You are at the point where they won't come back," said Randall.

Currituck's rescue and emergency workers also pointed to problems with stop-and-go traffic in summer.

Traffic back-ups mean that ambulances and fire trucks on the mainland cannot reach the Outer Banks, said EMS Chief Robert Glover.

The problem worsens should a hurricane strike, said Emergency Management Director Mary Beth News. On a good day, the Outer Banks could evacuate in 13 hours. But that exit time grows to 32 hours if the storm approaches on a week when the sun is shining and beaches are packed.

The video also calculates what Currituck, Dare and the state may lose in tax dollars if a bridge isn't built.

The state's annual collection from the two counties, according to the N.C. Department of Commerce, is \$50 million. That far exceeds the \$28 million the state will pay each year to subsidize construction of the toll bridge, local officials said.

On Wednesday, the county was making copies of the new video to send to Raleigh. Lawmakers on the Transportation Oversight Committee will be taking a closer look at the project at a meeting on Friday. Currituck is sending a delegation to counter the most recent assault on the project.

Commissioner Owen Etheridge said he's not sure if county officials will be allowed to speak or show the video, but Owens is trying to arrange for a showing. The county will hand out copies to committee members anyway, said Etheridge.

To combat the most recent threat to the Mid-Currituck Bridge, the county paid \$8,250 to have the video made by private producer Eye Candy Digital Video of Moyock. The video was paid for with revenues from Currituck's tax on hotel stays and cottage rentals.

Some Corolla residents who oppose the bridge said the new video didn't change their minds but admitted it was persuasive. Ed Marzetti and Paul Stalter compared it to hearing opening arguments from only one attorney at a trial.

"They haven't heard the other side," said Stalter.

At Tuesday's presentation, one transportation board member asked how to answer complaints he's heard that the project only benefits vacationers from Virginia.

O'Neal pointed to the economic impact of those vacationers on the region and the state. Vacationers come with fat wallets when arriving and leave with empty ones, he said. That spending creates jobs, supports businesses and generates taxes, both at the local and state levels, he said.