

McCrory budget would toll Knotts Island Ferry

By Cindy Beamon
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CURRITUCK — Not once, not twice, but three times now toll-free ferry rides from Knotts Island to Currituck's mainland will face a possible end because of state budget cuts.

This year, Gov. Pat McCrory's proposed \$20.6 billion budget calls for all ferries in North Carolina to charge tolls.

Currituck officials are already protesting the possibility after fending off similar proposals for the past two years in the General Assembly.

Commissioner Paul Martin said he and other county officials registered their complaints during a meeting this week with Senate officials in Raleigh.

"We told them it's totally unfair," said Martin.

Commissioner Vance Aydlett, a Knotts Island resident, said the continued attempts in Raleigh to add ferry tolls reflects state leaders' lack of understanding of the area.

"If some of the people in Raleigh would get out of their offices and look around here a little bit, they would understand the situation a little better," Aydlett said.

Aydlett said the Knotts Island ferry is akin to a road on the mainland because it connects the remote community to the rest of the county. In fact, roads can sometimes be more costly than ferries, he noted.

Aydlett likes a cost comparison former state Rep. Bill Owens, D-Pasquotank, quoted last year: the entire state's ferry budget costs less than building one mile of road through the mountains.

Currituck officials also argue the Knotts Island ferry is not like other ferries that cater to tourists.

"The ferry is for the working class in Currituck County. It's the way to get to their government offices, to their work, and to the schools," said Paul O'Neal, chairman of the Currituck Board of Commissioners.

O'Neal said the county has already attached its name to one House bill that would exempt the Knotts Island ferry, among a few others, from charging tolls.

State Sen. Bill Cook, R-Beaufort, said he plans to introduce a bill next week that will keep tolls off all ferries in North Carolina.

"The way to do this is to attack them all, not just selected ones," said Cook.

After talking with fellow lawmakers, Cook said he's confident ferry tolls will not be included in the final version of the state budget.

McCrory's budget is just a proposal. Both the state House and Senate will now craft their own versions of a budget plan that will have to be agreed to and signed by the governor.

Local officials say the final outcome could affect the school district's transportation budget.

The ferry transports a school bus and students driving their own cars to Currituck High School each day, said Assistant Superintendent Sandy Kinzel.

The school district's transportation costs will go up, but how much depends on how much the state would charge for tolls, said Kinzel.

Driving around the ferry through Virginia costs an extra \$220 a day, based on a formula by N.C. Department of Transportation that figures gas, maintenance and bus replacement costs. Most likely the tolls would cost less than driving around the ferry, she noted.

The impact on student drivers could be even greater, she said.

"It's going to add hardship to our kids and their families on Knotts Island," said Kinzel.

Tolls could also affect students' access to after-school activities and tutoring if students opt to ride the bus rather than drive.

"It would limit their ability to fully engage in the educational experience," said Kinzel.

Driving around the ferry not only costs more, but it takes longer and is riskier, said Aydlett.

Narrow, twisty roads from Knotts Island through Virginia already have a reputation for mishaps, he said.

If a driver slips off the asphalt a couple inches, his vehicle is likely to land in a ditch or hit a tree, Aydlett said.