

City Council favors cheapest East End routing

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DURHAM -- The City Council voted 6-1 Monday to ask N.C. Department of Transportation engineers to concentrate on the cheapest routing of the proposed East End Connector as it refines the project's environmental impact statement.

The nonbinding vote came little more than a week before DOT is scheduled to pare down a list of potential routings for the long-debated link between the Durham Freeway and U.S. 70. The one endorsed by the council would cost an estimated \$135 million and peel away from the freeway at a point just south of East End Avenue.

Officials acknowledged that DOT's draft construction for the next seven years has only a bit less than \$100 million earmarked for the project, and that it had taken a long struggle with the agency to get even that.

"It will be difficult to find the additional funds, but we will continue to work with DOT and hopefully find those," city Transportation Manager Mark Ahrendsen said. "But cost will be a factor in keeping this project on schedule."

But the council's main concern Monday was assuring people who live along the potential routings of the connector that they'll be treated fairly as the design and construction process unfolds.

East Durham residents who attended Monday's council forum on the issue involved a piece of Durham history -- the displacement of the Hayti community by the construction of the Durham Freeway -- as they urged elected officials to shelve the project entirely.

Many warned that even though only a few dozen homes would be displaced, the project's impact is likely to fall on elderly homeowners who would be unable to purchase mortgage-free homes in Durham equivalent to the ones in which they're living now.

"What type of life would they have if they were forced to relocate?" asked Sylvester Williams, a minister who spoke for some of the residents. "Even if they're given triple the tax value, they still would not be able to afford the average house in Durham."

Residents of the Duke Park neighborhood, however, showed up to remind the council that DOT's traffic models suggest the connector would likely take about 25,000 cars a day off existing streets that pass through center-city neighborhoods like theirs.

The most likely roads to benefit would be Duke, Gregson, Mangum and Roxboro streets, Alston Avenue and Avondale Drive, Ahrendsen said.

Recent history suggests that DOT will help control speeds on those roads only when a pedestrian dies in an accident, as recently happened on Duke Street, Duke Park resident Barry Ragin said.

Council members agreed to establish an ad-hoc committee that would include residents and meet with DOT officials about the project.

The only dissenting vote Monday came from Councilman Howard Clement, who objected to biasing the committee's consultation effort by signaling the council's routing preference.