

East End Connector forum criticized

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DURHAM -- The City Council's handling of this week's forum on the long-planned East End Connector drew sharp criticism on Wednesday from both the project's supporters and opponents.

One of the people in favor of the connector at Monday's forum, Duke Park neighborhood resident Barry Ragin, complained that council members failed to speak up for a project they've spent years lobbying the state to build, and compounded that mistake by allowing the project's critics to frame the night's debate as a racial issue.

"I am tired of and frustrated by a process that continually pits one neighborhood against another instead of identifying our common interests -- in this case, making all of our roadways safer for all of our citizens -- and making those our highest priorities," Ragin said in a long e-mail to council members.

Ragin added that he didn't appreciate "being cast into the role of personifying 'white privilege' " in a debate with East Durham residents and activists opposed to the project.

Duke Park is located just south of Interstate 85 and west of Roxboro Street/Roxboro Road (U.S. 15-501 Business north).

But one of those critics, Sylvester Williams, weighed in after the hearing with several e-mails of his own, finishing with one that accused a council member of being too beholden to local environmentalists to judge the project fairly.

"Are you too closely tied to the Eno [River] Association to see the damage that could be done to a historically black community?" Williams asked, directing the question to Councilwoman Diane Catotti.

The council on Monday wound up voting for what is supposed to be the least-expensive -- \$135 million -- of four routes N.C. Department of Transportation engineers have proposed for the East End Connector. If DOT picks that one, the new road would branch off the Durham Freeway slightly more than a mile south of Briggs Avenue and proceed northeast to link to U.S. 70 near East End Avenue.

Early estimates from DOT suggest that route -- which engineers are calling "Alternative 3" -- would affect fewer homes and businesses than the others, and require at least 31 acres less right of way.

Aerial photos and DOT maps show that that route would traverse a series of vacant parcels in most of its path. It would displace houses at two points, first as it leaves the freeway and crosses Angier Avenue, and again as it crosses Rowena Avenue near Checkerberry Lane.

From the maps and aerial photos, it appears the route would impinge on roughly a dozen home sites in all. DOT engineers, however, are saying they expect it to affect 36 residences and 15 businesses. Those numbers are preliminary, and could change when the agency completes the connector's environmental impact statement.

Council members weren't interested Monday in another route the agency is studying -- known as "Alternative 2" -- that has drawn criticism across the board because it passes through the heart of the Hayestown neighborhood, which is sandwiched between End End and Angier avenues.

At an estimated \$200 million, the Hayestown route is the most expensive option before DOT in

part because engineers figure it would displace 75 homes and 25 businesses.

But instead of merely opposing that route, Williams and other critics said Monday they want the project canceled. They complained that officials haven't looked seriously at widening existing streets to accommodate traffic moving between the Durham Freeway and Interstate 85.

That solution is anathema to people like Ragin because it means putting even more cars on north-south thoroughfares like Duke, Gregson, Mangum and Roxboro streets, Alston Avenue and Avondale Drive.

Race-based arguments potentially enter the picture because while Alston and Avondale pass through predominantly black North-East Central Durham, the other roads don't.

Another option -- the controversial Eno Drive loop -- got scrapped in 2002 as part of a compromise orchestrated by Mayor Bill Bell. Environmentalists opposed the loop because of its potential impact on Eno River State Park.

Asked for his reaction to Ragin's criticism, Bell said he'd thought it better during the forum to let Williams and other critics have their say.

"I didn't feel it was necessary to respond that night because people were emotional and wanted to get their point across," he said. "Part of the process is to try to understand the concerns and mitigate them as much as we possibly can. The council will look to do that, and try to impress on DOT that they've got to be sensitive to that."