

N.C. House agrees to study more toll roads, Currituck bridge

The Associated Press

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North Carolina's toll road authority could study and build up to nine projects - up from the current three - in a bill approved Wednesday by the House.

The North Carolina Turnpike Authority agreed this year to study four projects but under current law can't build them all. There are now no toll roads in North Carolina.

Supporters of studying more projects argue it will make it easier to complete critical highway jobs. The number of highway contracts this year are expected to be reduced due to a cash drain in the Department of Transportation funds.

Any project approved for construction would be financed with bonds repaid with collected tolls.

Projects the authority already has agreed to study are a bridge across the Cape Fear River in Wilmington; a 20-mile parkway between Charlotte/Douglas International Airport and Gastonia; the Monroe Connector between the U.S. 74 bypass and Interstate 485; and a road from the Durham Freeway to I-540.

The bill also would appear to assist efforts to build a proposed bridge linking mainland Currituck County across the Currituck Sound to the resort communities of the northern Outer Banks.

The bill states the Department of Transportation would have authority until July 2009 to issue a license to build a private toll bridge of "more than two miles in length going from the mainland to a peninsula bordering the State of Virginia."

A law that gave DOT this authority had expired in 2003 and did not define where the bridge would have to be built.

Mainland Currituck motorists now must travel across the Wright Memorial Bridge and enter Dare County before traveling north to the Currituck Outer Banks along the two-lane N.C. Highway 12, which is heavily congested during the vacation season.

The measure was tentatively approved 99-19 and sent to the Senate on a second, voice vote

ECU receives federal funds to study Currituck Sound bridge

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CURRITUCK, N.C. -- East Carolina University will receive \$2 million in federal funds to study the possibility of building a 10-mile bridge over the Currituck Sound.

The study of the bridge, which would cross the sound from the mainland to the Outer Banks, could begin in the fall, said Al Delia, director of federal relations for the university.

The money comes from the six-year, \$286.4 billion highway and mass transit bill passed by Congress last week, said Lindsay Taylor, a spokeswoman for Sen. Elizabeth Dole, R-N.C.

A local group, Build the Bridge Preserve Our Roads, has lobbied federal and state representatives since last year to get the federal money.

The study will evaluate former studies, including one by the state that favored widening U.S. 158 over building the bridge, and another done by the local group that concluded the bridge was the best option, Delia said.

The state is studying how to best move traffic -- as many as 60,000 vehicles on a summer Saturday -- through Currituck and Dare counties to the northern Outer Banks.

The Legislature gave final approval Tuesday to a bill that revives a project to construct a private toll bridge, probably the Currituck County one. The measure gives DOT a license through mid-2009 to build the project.

The cost is estimated to be more than \$100 million. The project would be financed with bonds and repaid with tolls.

The bridge would relieve heavy traffic on U.S. 158 at the south end of the county and N.C. 12 in Duck and Southern Shores, supporters say. Opponents say the bridge would only attract more development and traffic.