

NC has a bidder for I-77 toll lanes

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The creation of toll lanes on Interstate 77 north of Charlotte took a big step closer to reality after the N.C. Department of Transportation announced Friday it has picked a bidder to build the 26-mile road expansion.

Pending a final review, DOT officials said, Cintra Infraestructuras S.A. will begin work on the toll lanes as early as December.

“This is a major step,” DOT spokeswoman Jen Thompson said Friday. “It makes it closer to being finalized.”

The project will be a public-private partnership, a new type of road funding in North Carolina. State officials say North Carolina will contribute \$88 million toward the \$655 million project, with Cintra paying the rest. In return, Cintra will receive toll revenues for 50 years.

“Innovative funding solutions like this one are vital to keep up with growth and infrastructure,” said Mike Holder, chief engineer with the DOT.

By 2018, state officials say, motorists will have the choice of driving north into Iredell County on regular lanes or what the DOT calls “managed lanes.”

Cintra Infraestructuras, based in Spain, is among the world’s largest private developers of roads and other forms of transportation infrastructure. The company specializes in toll roads and has built the Chicago Skyway and the Indiana East-West Toll Road.

State officials said last month they had four bidders for the project.

The idea of having toll lanes on I-77 from the Brookshire Freeway north to Exit 36 in Mooresville has not been warmly received by all. A group calling itself Toll Free NC has been marshalling opposition to the plan. Its leaders say motorists will be surprised at the tolls, which they claim could range from \$5 to \$16 each way between Charlotte and Iredell County.

Toll Free NC refers to the I-77 toll lanes as “Lexus Lanes.”

State officials said they have not decided on the cost of the tolls, but they say the fees will vary depending on the time of day and the density of traffic. Vehicles carrying three or more passengers, motorcyclists and buses will be exempt from the tolls.

Under the plan, one lane will be added to I-77 in each direction from the Brookshire Freeway to Exit 28 in Cornelius. In addition, the current High Occupancy Vehicle lane will be converted to a toll lane. That will leave, for the most part, two nontoll lanes and two pay-to-drive lanes. One toll lane will be added in each direction from Exit 28 to Exit 36.

A new bridge will also be built to control the traffic moving from I-77 to the Brookshire Freeway.

STAFF WRITER JOE MARUSAK CONTRIBUTED.