

Contractor Says I-77 Tolls Will Open By Year End, But Not Some Ramps

By [DAVID BORAKS](#) · AUG 1, 2018



David Hannon of I-77 Mobility Partners points to ramp construction at the I-277 and I-77 interchange in Charlotte during a tour this week.

DAVID BORAKS /WFAE

Construction crews still have lots of work to do before toll lanes can open on I-77 from Charlotte to Mooresville. The question on commuters' minds is: Will they be ready as promised by the end of the year?

The state's contractor says yes. But even as construction continues, opponents are hoping the state will end or significantly change the \$650 million deal. An answer could come later this month.

A visit to the 26-mile project this week revealed signs of progress, but also major work left.



A map shows the length of the 26-mile project from Charlotte Mooresville, with toll lane entry and exit points.

CREDIT I-77 MOBILITY PARTNERS

One of the most complicated sections is the tangle of ramps and bridges just north of uptown, where I-277 meets I-77.

David Hannon is the chief infrastructure officer for I-77 Mobility Partners, the company hired by NCDOT to build and operate the toll lanes. As he pointed to work going on behind him, he said: "We're currently standing on what will be the future 277 west to 77 southbound ramp. So the contractor is working on building the new bridge that will be the majority of that ramp, and once that bridge is complete the old ramp will be demolished."

The project is at peak employment right now, Hannon said — about 1,100 workers with 90 different contractors and subcontractors at work to finish the toll lanes.

ON TRACK - EXCEPT FOR SOME RAMPS

"We are on track to open the project by the end of the year," Hannon said.

"So we're going to have one opening, is the current plan, all the way from the southern end of the project all the way to the northern end."

But there's an asterisk. Direct connector ramps to and from the toll lanes won't be ready in several locations until months after the toll lanes open, Hannon said.

One of those is on that mountain of red dirt with a great view of Charlotte's skyline. Right now, those ramps Hannon mentioned are mostly just two rows of concrete columns waiting to be connected by steel beams and roadway. They won't be ready by year's end, Hannon said.

"There was a major redesign to the project and a change order that happened probably about a year into the design process," Hannon said. "And so we were a little late in getting started on those. And so those won't be

quite ready when we're ready to open the rest of the project, so they'll open probably in the early part of 2019."

Another late change was the addition of two ramps connecting the toll lanes directly to overpasses in north Mecklenburg. Those aren't scheduled to open until July 2019 - about six months after the toll lanes open. Until then, commuters will have to use regular on and off ramps and transfer zones to get in and out of the toll lanes.

Seven transfer zones are planned in both directions. Some drivers have expressed concern about getting in and out of those lanes when the regular free lanes are clogged. Hannon said they're spaced out to give drivers the maximum distance to get to their exits.

"We've tried to exceed the minimums that are out there so the minimum guidance says you need at least 500 feet per lane change, and then desirable is like 800 to 1000 feet. We've tried to be 1,000 feet to 1,200 feet per lane change that you need to make," he said.

MAJOR CHANGES ON THE ROUTE

Construction began three years ago on the project, which widens one of the Charlotte area's most congested stretches of interstate.



A direct access ramp is being added at I-77 and Hambright Road in Huntersville. Officials say it won't be open until after the toll lanes open.
CREDIT DAVID BORAKS / WFAE

There are four new bridges, and three others are being widened. And I-77 contractors have built two tunnels: One carries northbound toll lanes under a crossover section of the highway at I-85. The other has been dug under I-77 in Huntersville for a future greenway. And noise walls are going up all along the road.

At the project's northern end, the toll lanes are nearly finished, lying tantalizingly in wait for the end of the year. Spokeswoman Jean Leier of I-77 Mobility Partners said she's already getting questions from drivers.

"They are inquiring what transponder do they need, when they can get their transponders, how do the lanes work. We're really seeing an uptick in

questions as people see the construction coming to fruition this year," she said.

HOW THE TOLLS WORK

Transponders are the devices that go on your windshield and send electronic signals to overhead toll receivers.

If you don't have one, you can still use the toll lanes. Cameras will snap a picture of your license plate and the North Carolina Turnpike Authority will send you a bill by mail, but you'll pay 35 percent more than if you have a transponder.

Toll rates haven't been set yet. They still have to be presented at a public hearing to be scheduled this fall.

For the first six months, they'll be fixed, to get drivers used to the process, Leier said. After that, rates will vary according to the amount of traffic, with a goal of keeping traffic flowing in the express lanes at a minimum 45 miles per hour.

At rush hour, it's going to cost you: A preliminary study three years ago estimated tolls could run \$9 to \$11 for the whole 26 miles at peak times.

OPPOSITION REMAINS

This is the first time NCDOT has hired a private company to finance, build and manage a toll project. Even as construction continues, opponents in the Lake Norman area north of Charlotte are still trying to stop or change the project. Some object to tolls in general. Others say the contract is a bad deal. Some business owners have said the tolls could hurt the local economy.

With all their complaints, citizens and lawmakers have forced the DOT to take a long look at the project. There was a state audit which found nothing wrong in NCDOT's contract with Spanish construction company Cintra and I-77 Mobility Partners.

And last year, a consultant was brought in to examine options for ending or changing the deal.

This spring, state Transportation Secretary Jim Trogdon held a series of meetings with local business and civic leaders to examine those options for changing or ending the contract. In May, all but two members of the advisory group urged NCDOT to complete construction, buy out the contract, and convert one planned toll lane to a free lane.

But a buyout could cost hundreds of millions of dollars, and the big question is how the state might pay for it. In June, bills to fund a buyout failed at the General Assembly.

Cornelius business owner John Hettwer, who was on the advisory committee, said the DOT has options.

"They've been accelerating projects, and perhaps you stop accelerating projects to handle this, right? And so there's different avenues," Hettwer said. "They're looking at doing some bonds. Maybe you bond it and then the toll road pays for the bond."

Trogdon will meet one more time with the advisory group, on Aug. 15 at the Lake Norman Chamber in Cornelius. There's no agenda yet, but a spokeswoman says he'll share his thoughts on "realistic, viable next steps."

Asked about possible contract changes, Jean Leier of I-77 Mobility Partners spokeswoman, said only: "We have not been part of that process. We remain

committed to our partnership with NCDOT and we remain focused on getting the roadway done and open by the end of the year.”