

# Greenway tunnel nearing completion under Interstate 77

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HUNTERSVILLE – For more than two years, signs of construction in the median and around bridges have been clear reminders of the I-77 Express Lanes coming to a 26-mile stretch of Interstate 77 between Mooresville and Charlotte.

But an unseen, non-roadway part of the project – well below ground a few hundred feet north of the Exit 23 overpass – has also been taking shape. And now a greenway tunnel providing a rare passage for pedestrians and bicyclists from one side of the interstate to the other is nearly complete.

The under-the-interstate greenway passage is being built as part of the express lanes project using \$6 million in bonus allocation funds made available for transportation improvements in the region where the managed lanes will operate. The concrete tunnel will provide a link to planned greenway segments on both sides of I-77.

Much of the 248-foot-long, 12-foot-tall subterranean passageway 30-feet below the interstate is finished.

The eastern end of the tunnel is complete. It is near the Charlotte Area Transit System's park and ride lot in the Gateway commercial development that includes, among other businesses, a Hampton Inn & Suites, Bojangles' and Cook-Out.

The last 25 feet of the western end of the tunnel is still under construction. It will end near a utility line easement and low-lying area behind the Bexley Commons apartment complex in the Rosedale development near Exit 23.

A preview of the nearly finished tunnel was provided recently by representatives of I-77 Mobility Partners, the firm building the express lanes, and Sugar Creek Construction, the primary contractor for the project. Those taking part in the work-site tour included David Hannon, chief infrastructure officer for Mobility Partners; Jean Leier, director of corporate affairs for Mobility Partners; Julie Pettus, safety coordinator for Sugar Creek in the Charlotte-to-Cornelius section of the project; and Sayra Brynn, public relations and construction communication manager for Sugar Creek.

Huntersville Principal Planner David Peete and Huntersville Parks and Recreation Department (HPRD) Recreation Superintendent Tracy Houk – both liaisons to the town's Greenway, Trail and Bikeway Commission (GTBC) – also participated.

Greenway connections on both sides of the interstate are already planned, and the Town of Huntersville has pledged \$300,000 toward those projects. The tunnel has been part of the express lanes plans since construction plans were finalized. And multiple times in subsequent town meetings, members of the GTBC, describing I-77 as a “major barrier” for pedestrians and bicyclists, have told town commissioners the tunnel would be a valuable part of the town and county proposed greenway network.

The current plans for using the tunnel involve extending the Torrence Creek Tributary II greenway under the interstate from west to east. Future sections would cross U.S. 21 and, eventually, the greenway would cut across property behind Huntersville Elementary School to intersect with N.C. 115.

At a Huntersville town board meeting in January, HPRD Director Michael Jaycocks described the tunnel as a vital part of plans for a 7-mile walking and cycling link between the new Veterans Park at Main & Maxwell in downtown Huntersville and the Birkdale development.