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EDITORIALS

I-77's tolls will be just as successful as the ones before them

By Walter R. Turner - Special to the Observer editorial board

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Since moving to the small town of Wadesboro, I often travel to Monroe and Charlotte for movies, medical appointments or a Harris-Teeter store. The traffic growth is overwhelming. Lots of cars come through our town and continue to the beach on either US 74 to Wilmington and Brunswick County or US 52 to the Myrtle Beach area. In addition, we see more and more large trucks.

Aware of the increasing traffic, the General Assembly in 2002 established the North Carolina Turnpike Authority. The first project to open was the Triangle Expressway, an 18-mile route on the west side of Raleigh that is an extension of the I-540 loop. It is also a toll road. For those living in the southwest area of Wake County, the Expressway offers a fast trip to the airport or westbound on I-40. Unlike Charlotte, drivers in Raleigh and the Triangle area have shown a willingness to accept tolls. In fact, the remaining 30 miles of the I-540 loop will likely be a toll road as well.

The Turnpike Authority's next project is the Monroe Expressway. The project that speeds access to the South Carolina beaches was delayed for years because of environmental issues. The 20-mile highway route starts just east of I-485 on US 74 and extends to Marshville in eastern Union County. It includes six full interchanges and partial interchanges at both ends. Although it will require tolls to use it, no one in this area is complaining. I'm ready to order my transponder, which would be mounted on the inside windshield in order to pay the lowest tolls. Those without transponders will be billed more.

Which brings me to the project Charlotte Observer columnist Mark Washburn and others love to hate. The I-77 project will help provide more reliable travel times on 26 miles of I-77 from Brookshire Freeway (Exit 11) in Mecklenburg County to N.C. 150 (Exit 36). The project addresses the explosive growth of the Lake Norman area in a practical way. It includes both free and toll lanes and space to accommodate buses to carry passengers.

The Cintra Company, which develops large-scale transportation infrastructure projects, designed the I-77 project. The company started in 1998 with headquarters in Madrid, Spain, and the U.S. headquarters in Austin, Texas. It now has projects in 10 countries, including Canada with three current projects. I support the current I-77 plan because of what Cintra has accomplished in Texas. The company designed projects that opened in Fort Worth in 2015 and Dallas in 2016. Both projects are successful and have similarities with I-77.

It is alarming and fiscally irresponsible that the General Assembly has considered compromising the I-77 project at a cost of millions of dollars. Both the I-77 and Monroe Expressway will be completed this year. Contrary to its critics, I predict that I-77 will meet with the same success as the Triangle Expressway and Monroe Expressway. Getting home quicker will overshadow the inconvenience of paying for a faster ride.

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