

U.S. 29 timetable depends on route

By Chris Edwards McNett
Staff Writer

State highway officials' recent statements that a \$109 million western bypass could be completed decades earlier than the far less costly group of improvements outlined in the Charlottesville-Albemarle Transportation Study (CATS) plan reflect state priorities as well as the machinations of bureaucracy, commentators note.

The CATS plan, originally developed in the 1970s, called for a number of local improvements to traffic congestion, including widening the U.S. 29 corridor and constructing a Meadowcreek Parkway east of U.S. 29.

Though the widening of U.S. 29 is expected to begin in less than two years, completion of the total CATS plan may be up to four decades away, officials have said.

CATS improvements have remained on hold for several years pending the Commonwealth Transportation Board's decision on the U.S. 29 corridor.

The board decided early this month that plans should be made for the eventual construction of a short western bypass.

Dates are indefinite for the bypass as well as the CATS improvements. But though the year 2010 is projected as the time that a bypass will be needed, highway officials have said the entire group of improvements in the CATS plan may take 30 to 40 years.

While a number of local planners have suggested implementing relatively low-scale improvements, such as those in the CATS plan, before deciding whether a bypass is needed, the actual order of construction may be reversed.

Though placing the bypass before the CATS plan may seem illogical from a local point of view, City Councilor Tom Vandever said this week that he sees "logic to the state" in beginning with a bypass designed to solve regional, not merely local, traffic needs.

But in the wake of the board's decisions, nothing is being termed "sure."

The following estimates were



Photo by MARY ANN GLYNN

Though some relief may be coming sooner than expected, government officials estimate that it may be 2020 before the entire set of Charlottesville-Albemarle Transportation Study improvements to U.S. 29 are complete.

made this week on times and costs for proposed traffic improvements.

The bypass: Commonwealth Transportation Board Chief

Engineer Jack Hodge noted this week that the board recommended "if possible, to work with the county to protect the right-of-way" for a

short bypass west of U.S. 29. Such a bypass is designated as Alternate 10 on the state-commissioned road

See U.S. 29, Page 2

'Base case' plan for Rt. 29 likely will be first begun

"U.S. 29" from page 1

study that was scrutinized in past public hearings.

The board asked the county government to prevent development on the bypass right-of-way by its development and zoning requirements until the state gets the money to buy the right-of-way. But members of the county Board of Supervisors say there is no legal way they could carry out that request, supervisor David Bowerman and board chairman F.R. "Rick" Bowie noted this week.

A number of county residents know that the bypass will come in the neighborhood of their property, including supervisor Charlotte Humphris.

"I saw some [homeowners] burst into tears up there in Manassas" when the board announced its decision on the bypass, she said.

Several people have said the decision to merely "preserve" designated land for acquisition that could be decades away may cause them to lose their investment in their homes, which may now become white elephants on the housing market.

But the exact lines showing what properties will be taken have not been drawn, Hodge noted.

Though he said it might take "a couple of years to have the exact right-of-way plans," he added that in six to eight months from now, the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) hopes to have prepared "functional plans" to show property owners the right-of-way "within a few feet."

Contrary to earlier reports, Hodge did not predict that a new bypass would be built in four to five years, but merely said it might be done in that amount of time "if we had the money and the go-ahead," he noted.

A VDOT report this week said that "No bypass construction is anticipated before the year 2010."

Hodge said that construction of a bypass cannot be considered as an absolute certainty.

State officials, he said, have "no assurance" of whether or when funding will become available.

"We can just protect [the right of way] and work toward it," he added.

The Meadowcreek Parkway.

The long-planned road east of U.S. 29 is part of the CATS plan which, Hodge noted, falls under the aegis of the state's secondary road system, which is funded and administered under a separate framework from the primary system that encompasses U.S. 29 as well as the proposed bypass.

The separate bureaucratic domains are the cause of the different funding projections for the bypass and CATS plan, he said.

Vandever said this week that the bypass selection effectively killed an idea proposed last year by city officials for an "Ivy Creek Parkway" west of U.S. 29 and parallel to the Meadowcreek Parkway.

County officials opposed the Ivy Creek plan, which city spokesmen advocated as a compromise, claiming it could forestall the need for a bypass.

"The county made negotiations impossible by staking out its position," Vandever said.

City residents, Vandever noted, have feared the impact to residential and business districts by a Meadowcreek Parkway, slated, according to the most recent plans, to take part of McIntire Park and end at the intersection of McIntire Road and the U.S. 250 Bypass.

The city council recently recommended changing an earlier plan that would have extended the parkway as far south as Preston Avenue.

Community Development Director Satyendra Huja, however, noted this week that the revised plan depends on approval by the

highway department.

But even with the new plan, a number of city residents have voiced concern that the parkway — leading into McIntire Road and in turn to Ridge Street, which has been slated for widening — could create a major thoroughfare that might effectively divide Charlottesville in two segments, Vandever noted. He said he hopes design improvements can be developed to ward off that possibility.

Earlier VDOT estimates gave \$21 million as an approximate cost and 1994 as a possible starting date for the Meadowcreek Parkway if an agreement is finalized to build it.

The "base case" plan. In addition to planning for a bypass, the transportation board recommended implementing a so-called "base case" proposal, first developed in the 1980s, to widen U.S. 29 to six traffic lanes and two continuous right-turn lanes at an estimated cost of \$26 million, in addition to planning for construction of three grade-separated interchanges.

The base case is expected to be the first plan to see fruition. Hodge gave "a year to 18 months" as a "conservative estimate" of when the widening of 29 may begin.

Interchanges. The board recommended grade-separated interchanges at the Greenbrier Drive, Hydraulic Road and Rio Road intersections, at an estimated total cost of \$45 million.

Hodge said a public hearing will be required before plans can be finalized on the interchanges, which have been opposed by a number of area business owners who would be impacted.

According to a statement by the board, construction of the interchanges "could come around the year 2000" if funds are available.



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