

# Senate Votes To Kill Bridge Funding

By **Cindy Beamon**

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The state Senate on Thursday voted to end funding for the Mid-Currituck Bridge as it's currently planned.

But state Rep. Bill Cook, R-Beaufort, said he's been assured by House leaders that House Bill 10 will never gain full approval by the General Assembly.

"Now, it will go back to the House, (and) there it will die. That's what the House leadership tells me," Cook said Thursday.

The bill proposes to remove funding for three state projects under the N.C. Turnpike Authority, created in 2002 by the General Assembly to oversee costly road projects that lawmakers designated as priorities. The proposed Mid-Currituck Bridge, the Garden Parkway in Gaston and the Cape Fear Skyway could all be on the chopping block. Bill supporters said two other Turnpike projects were too far along to end their funding.

If the measure passed in the Senate on Thursday is approved by the General Assembly, the projects would have to compete for regional dollars under the state Department of Transportation's capital improvements plan.

Bridge supporters have repeatedly said the shift would essentially kill the project. In earlier challenges to bridge funding, now-retired lawmaker state Bill Owens, D-Pasquotank, claimed the \$660 million bridge would take too large a chunk from the region's road construction funds to make it feasible under the DOT funding plan.

But Cook said Thursday he was assured by other senators that the change would not end chances for the bridge's construction. If the entire District 1 backed the project, funding should be available, he said he was told.

Cook, who voted against House Bill 10 three times, said he wasn't convinced the change wouldn't hurt the bridge's chances for construction.

"I couldn't vote for it because it took away the priority which the bridge presently enjoys," he said.

Cook said he was taken by surprise when the measure came up for a vote on Wednesday.

When House Bill 10 was first introduced in the House, it contained nothing about changing funding for the Turnpike Authority projects. The House version of the bill only removed a restriction on the Turnpike Authority's selection of a corridor location for the southeast extension of N.C. Highway 540 in the Research Triangle area.

That changed, however, after House Bill 10 reached the Senate's Committee on Transportation. There the change removing funding for the three Turnpike projects was inserted into the bill.

Cook said he didn't know about the change until the bill's second reading and a vote before the full Senate on Wednesday. The bill passed, but opposition required the Senate to wait another day for a third reading of the bill before it could be voted on for adoption.

On Thursday, House Bill 10 passed the Senate by a 36-14 vote. It now heads back to the House where lawmakers there will have to approve the version including the language removing the Turnpike projects' funding for the measure to be adopted.

Cook said he's optimistic the bill will not go any farther.

"I am convinced it will not go anywhere," he said.

The recent challenge to the seven-mile span connecting Currituck's mainland to the Outer Banks is one of several that have beset the proposed project in the past couple years.

Since 2010, funding for the project has been diverted to other state road projects, reportedly because the toll bridge was not yet ready for construction.

Under the leadership of retired Senate leader Marc Basnight, D-Dare, the General Assembly voted to pay \$28 million over the next 30 years in "gap funds" to keep tolls from being too high. The state was also been negotiating with a private partner to construct and manage the bridge.

After Basnight's departure and a political power shift in the state Senate, some lawmakers have sought to delay or halt funding for the project.

One of the recent assaults has come from Sen. Bill Rabon, R-Brunswick, chairman of the Joint Legislative Oversight Committee, who says the project was approved under previous political "cronism."

Bridge supporters say halting the project would mean a loss for taxpayers. The state has already invested nearly \$25 million, mostly in federal dollars, in planning and designs for the span, Owens said before leaving office. Ending the financial negotiations with the state's private partner in the project could cost up to \$10 million more.