



Published on HamptonRoads.com | PilotOnline.com (<http://hamptonroads.com>)

Shortcut to paradise: Toll bridge to the Outer Banks

Corolla has long been one of Currituck County's favorite - and most remote - Outer Banks travel havens.

Getting there requires making what is essentially a giant U-turn that can add more than a hour's drive.

Those familiar with the jaunt know that first you must drive south almost to Kitty Hawk before crossing the Currituck Sound. Then you flip around on N.C. 12 and head north toward Corolla, land of wild horses, a lighthouse and isolated beaches.

After about 20 years of debate, state and local officials and environmentalists are near agreement on a \$659 million shortcut: a 5-mile bridge over the sound that would link Corolla to a small town about a 40-minute drive from the Virginia-North Carolina line.

State engineers have partnered with a private construction group that will lead the design, construction and operation, including toll collection, estimated to be \$8 each way during the peak season and \$6 during offseason.

A 2007 study estimated the bridge would draw an average of 13,500 vehicles daily on peak-season weekends, with revenues of \$7 million in its first year.

By 2025, traffic counts are expected to average 19,200 daily on summer weekends, with tolls at \$12 and annual revenue of \$24.9 million. The state budget includes \$15 million annually in public money to help finance the project.

A draft environmental impact statement is due out before the end of the year. By February or March, construction could begin on the bridge, with completion expected in 2013.

Proponents say the bridge will relieve congestion on U.S. 158 and N.C. 12 through Duck, hasten hurricane evacuation, lower costs of construction in Corolla and expedite county services there.

Most elected officials - including North Carolina state Sen. Marc Basnight - and residents in Dare and Currituck counties have supported the project even before it was first put on a state highway plan in 1989.

"We need that bridge bad," said Gene Gregory, a Currituck commissioner who has pushed for construction more than 20 years. "We've been on the verge two or three times before something has popped up to delay the thing again."

Since the project's inception, state and federal environmental agencies weighed its value versus its effects on the environment.

In 2004, after a multiyear study, the state determined that widening U.S. 158 and N.C. 12 would relieve traffic better than a bridge.

But a local grass roots group, Build the Bridge - Preserve Our Roads, paid for a study that determined the bridge would be better and cheaper.

In Aydlett, a community of about 1,000 people without a traffic light or a gas station, residents opposed the intrusion to their quiet neighborhood. Aydlett sits on the shore of the Currituck Sound and is about 25 miles from

the Virginia border.

Last week, state officials announced another option for the Aydlett side that renewed opposition. To save \$60 million, the new road would be on the ground through the swamp with culverts to allow passage of water and animals.

Toll booths would be in Aydlett. Local traffic could use the new road to get to the highway. Aydlett Road, the existing road, would be removed to allow better water flow.

"That's the craziest thing I've ever heard," resident Mike Doxey said. "I am strongly against it."

Residents plan to file a petition against the latest option, Doxey said.

Penny Leary-Smith, an Aydlett property owner, also opposed the new option.

"When you have people leaving that meeting in tears, that's wrong," she said.

Even local officials who have supported the project all along don't like this idea.

"The Board of Commissioners does not support putting that traffic in Aydlett," said Paul O'Neal, a Currituck County commissioner. "That community would never be the same."

Others warn about traffic and crime flowing into Corolla as access becomes more convenient.

"People come to the Currituck Outer Banks because of its remote, pristine nature," Corolla resident Barry Richman said.

Large highway projects usually increase crime nearby, he said. Corolla already has problems with break-ins during the off-season, but now criminals will have easier access and more than one way out of town, he said.

Basnight still supports the bridge even with the cost-saving measures, said Schorr Johnson, a Basnight spokesman.

Public hearings will be held on the options, said Jennifer Harris, an engineer with the North Carolina Department of Transportation.

But these objections are not expected to slow construction, Gregory said.

"I feel strongly that it's going to happen this time," he said.

After the earlier setbacks, the project nearly died in 2005 when the North Carolina General Assembly assigned it to the state Turnpike Authority to use tolls and a private-public partnership to speed up construction.

The Turnpike Authority agreed in December to partner with a private group headed by ACS Infrastructure Development, a subsidiary of a firm based in Spain.

The ACS partners, collectively known as Currituck Development Group LLC, are also investors, following a pattern used in Europe.

Traditionally in North Carolina, contractors bid on projects already designed by the state and make no financial investment.

Two years ago, Basnight asked that the bridge include such Earth-friendly designs as solar powered lighting, a bicycle and walking path made from recycled plastics and a look that better blends with the Currituck Sound

environment. Those features remain options, Johnson said.

Once completed, a new road would intersect with U.S. 158 about a mile south of Coinjock, travel east around two miles through a swamp, pass through Aydlett where the bridge would begin and go about five miles over the Currituck Sound to Corolla. Toll booths would be placed near U.S. 158.

On both sides, the bridge follows generally vacant areas and would displace about 11 residences.

In Corolla, plans include two terminus options, one near the TimBuck II shopping center and the other about 1.5 miles north near the Corolla Bay subdivision.

In contrast, the four-lane Virginia Dare Memorial Bridge from Mann's Harbor to Roanoke Island was approved by the state in 1996 to replace the 43-year-old William B. Umstead Bridge, which was previously the only crossing over the Croatan Sound.

By 1998, Balfour Beatty Construction, Inc. of Atlanta was awarded the contract for the 5.2 mile bridge, the longest in the state.

Costing \$89 million, the bridge opened in August 2002, taking seven years from start to finish.

Jeff Hampton, (252) 338-0159, jeff.hampton@pilotonline.com

Source URL (retrieved on 10/19/2009 - 12:14): <http://hamptonroads.com/2009/10/shortcut-paradise-toll-bridge-outer-banks>