



DOT to take over Turnpike Authority

Mid-county bridge won't be affected

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Four years after the project was taken from the NC Department of Transportation and handed off to the NC Turnpike Authority, the Mid-Currituck Bridge will likely be back in DOT's hands.

The state House approved legislation last week transferring the administrative functions of the seven-year-old Turnpike Authority to the DOT. The Turnpike Authority currently has charge of the estimated \$600 million mid-county bridge project.

House members overwhelmingly favored the bill, sponsored by state Rep. Jim Crawford, D-Granville, voting 113-4 for the merger. Those voting in favor included area Reps. Bill Owens, D-Pasquotank, Timothy Spear, D-Washington, and Annie Mobley, D-Hertford.

The Senate signed off a similar bill when it approved its version of the state budget several months ago.

State officials said the move is designed to trim costs and improve efficiency.

Schorr Johnson, a spokesman for state Senate

President Pro Tempore Marc Basnight, said it's not known how much merging the Turnpike Authority with DOT will save the state. Since the Senate approved its version of next year's \$18 billion budget in May, state revenues have dropped an additional \$1 billion, he said.

House and Senate conferees are currently working to reach agreement on a budget before July 15, Johnson said. If they do, and the Turnpike Authority provision remains in the budget, the agency will cease to exist as a stand-alone agency. It instead will fall under the supervision of the DOT secretary, Johnson said.

Basnight was a chief proponents of giving the Turnpike Authority control of the long-delayed mid-county bridge project. In August 2005, then Gov. Mike Easley signed legislation giving the Turnpike Authority the ability to contract with private companies to build nine projects, one of them the long-delayed bridge spanning Currituck Sound.

At the time, a Basnight spokeswoman said taking the project from DOT and giving it to the Turnpike Authority would be more efficient and could speed up the engineering and permitting processes needed to build the bridge.

Since the Turnpike Authority took over, the mid-county bridge project — which was first discussed in the 1980s — has moved forward.

Last year, the Turnpike Authority determined that the project should be a toll bridge, and earlier this year, the agency announced it had signed a contract with ACS, a Spanish construction firm, to build it. A start date for the project — 2010 — and a completion date — 2013 — have also been set.

The Turnpike Authority is also currently studying three options, including a no-build option, for the 7-mile span.

Recently, Turnpike Authority officials announced that they were delaying completion of the environmental impact study until September.

Johnson, the Basnight spokesman, indicated that giving DOT control of the Turnpike Authority shouldn't affect the timetable for building the bridge.

"This was one of many hundreds of provisions in the budget," Johnson said. "Sen. Basnight supported (the

merger). The Mid-Currituck Bridge is one of his top priorities and he wouldn't have favored (the provision) if it had any detrimental effects on" that project.

Johnson said the Turnpike Authority may see some organizational changes, but that funding of key projects won't change. The Senate budget, for example, earmarks \$64 million for Turnpike Authority projects, including the mid-county bridge.

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