

Proposed Elevated Roadway for U. S. Highway 280

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Background:

Since the early 1980s, various groups of concerned citizens, business leaders and government elected officials have been at work to address the problems caused by the growth of the US 280 corridor.

The most recent organization to tackle a specific problem in the corridor is the Progress 280 Task Force. The Progress 280 Task Force was chartered by the Regional Growth Alliance in November, 2001 to address concerns over traffic congestion on the 11.5-mile portion of the corridor extending from the Elton B. Stephens Expressway near the site of the old Shades Valley high School eastward to Eagle Point Drive on Oak Mountain.

In its first five years of work, the task force has successfully proposed several major improvements to the corridor:

- The redesign of the route interchange at I-459 and US 280. This work is in Phase II of four phases now and is ongoing.
- The implementation by the Alabama Department of Transportation (ALDOT) of access management “best practices” at all intersections throughout the 11-mile corridor. This project, too, is an ongoing effort of the ALDOT and the Regional Planning Commission of Greater Birmingham.
- The addition of lanes to US 280 between the I-459/US 280 route interchange and Eagle Point Drive. This work has been formally added to the Transportation Improvement Plan (TIP) and funding for it has been identified.

In addition to these projects, the task force has commissioned and conducted work to evaluate the feasibility of Urban Interchanges at each of 10 major interchanges in the corridor. This study was done by UAB and was presented to the task force during 2003-'04. Governments in the corridor objected to the Urban Interchange concept because of the severe impact each of these “overpasses” would have on nearby property. It was noted that a great deal of property would have to be condemned in order to construct the Urban Interchanges. In addition, businesses near the proposed interchanges objected. The task force abandoned the plan for Urban Interchanges following the study.

In 2001, an Alternatives Analysis for the Birmingham region was commissioned by the Regional Planning Commission as a means of identifying corridors in the metro area that would be appropriate for mass transit consideration. In conjunction with this analysis – and for the succeeding five years since its release – the Birmingham Regional Chamber of Commerce has backed a legislative solution to find funding for the build-out of a mass transit program. To date, no such funding solution has been passed by the Jefferson County House delegation or by the Alabama legislature.

The task force has also discussed, but not formally studied, the concept of an “alternative route” for westbound commuting traffic to use. The only potential such alternative route would be to use the corridor now known as Grants Mill Road. While such an effort is under way, and may yield in the future some lessening of traffic flow on a portion of US

280, traffic engineers from Jefferson County have convinced the task force that such a route would not make a measurable impact on the congestion on the current US 280 corridor.

Each of the intersections on the US 280 corridor has been rated by ALDOT at “condition E or F” – signifying a failed intersection. To date, the only practical solution to improve the corridor’s traffic flow while preserving individual property rights and values has been to separate the future commuting traffic from stop-and-go “shopping” or “local” traffic on US 280. The only practical and cost-effective means of separating the traffic is by use of elevated lanes with median supports.

In early September of 2005, Governor Bob Riley invited the Progress 280 Task Force co-chairs to a meeting in his office. At that meeting, Linda Figg, representing Figg Bridge Engineers, Inc. (Tallahassee, FL), presented the concept of elevated roadways that have been built over a number of congested suburban corridors in the country. Attending that meeting were:

- Hank Collins of Wachovia Bank (now retired), representing business interests;
- Della Fancher, a citizen of Cahaba Heights/Vestavia Hills, representing citizen interests; and
- Steve Ostaseski of the Regional Planning Commission, representing Vestavia Hills Mayor Charles “Scotty” McCallum and the government interests on the task force.

On September 27, 2005 a meeting of the full Progress 280 Task Force was held at the Vestavia Hills Civic Center. Approximately 200 people were in attendance, including several area mayors, state legislators and members of the general public. At this meeting, Ms. Figg again presented her concepts for an elevated roadway that could alleviate some of the US 280 congestion. Governor Riley was also in attendance and offered to make this project his “top transportation priority” if the demand for it was forthcoming from the community at large.

Scope of Work Developed and Approved:

A subcommittee of the task force (the Technical Task Force, or TTF) has approved a two-phase scope of work as the next step in moving the discussion forward. The scope of work was formulated to underscore the importance of moving the project forward in measured, incremental steps. The scope was negotiated by the TTF and was subsequently endorsed by the full task force. It proposes a comprehensive study of public sentiment on the issue of an elevated roadway. The study will evaluate public sentiment on the question of an elevated roadway project specific to each of two segments of the corridor: an Eastern segment extending from the I-459 interchange to near Eagle Point Drive on Oak Mountain, and a Western segment extending from the I-459 interchange inbound to the junction of US 280 and the Elton B. Stephens Expressway. Additionally, the consultant’s work will be undertaken in two distinct phases:

- Preliminary Concept Phase – This phase includes the consolidation of all existing studies on the corridor, any existing plans for congestion mitigation and any previous engineering reports. Existing traffic studies will be included from ALDOT. Aerial mapping will be used to begin development of a footprint and the

preliminary design criteria. Conceptual designs will be presented to the public at a series of meetings to be held in to distinct segments of the corridor. Data analysis and summarization will stem from the public involvement meetings. Concepts will be refined and presented back to the Progress 280 subcommittee for an endorsement or consensus.

- Final Concept Phase – Using the above output, preliminary cost estimates and timelines for project implementation will be developed. ALDOT will assist in estimating how and over what period of time the project could be funded. A final, preliminary funding plan will be developed and presented to the task force subcommittee. Public involvement meetings will again be held, with data and output from those meetings folded back into the analysis. Depending on the nature of the public feedback, the task force will be asked to endorse the preliminary funding plan.

Following the two conceptual phases, and only if feedback on the project is positive, an “origin and destination” study would be done by a nationally-recognized traffic analysis firm. The results of the “O&D” study would help further define the corridor (its origin and terminus), the potential access points on the corridor, and the relative expected benefits in terms of congestion reduction.

The consultant has established a schedule of events to ensure the public is heard on the issue:

August 28/29	Public kick-off sessions specific to the Eastern and Western segments of the corridor. These were held at the Birmingham Marriott Hotel.
August-November	“Listening Tours” in which the consultant is meeting with as many as 100 individuals and groups to gauge specific, personal opinion and to receive feedback.
November 7/8	Design “charettes” specific to the Eastern and Western segments of the corridor, at which members of the public express preferences about a wide variety of potential design elements.

In mid-December, a final series of public involvement meetings will be held – again, with specific dates allocated for the Eastern and Western segment populations. Two public involvement meetings will be held each day (2-4pm and 6-8pm) to ensure the widest possible coverage of the working and stay-at-home public.

The task force is expected to take up questions related to possible funding alternatives after the first of the year.