

## **Key Questions to Ask About Any Plan for Highway 280:**

### **1. Does the plan effectively address traffic congestion? That is the genesis of the issue.**

- The key requirement of any plan for reducing traffic congestion is to separate the commuting, or express, traffic from the local traffic. Once separated, access to the commuting lanes needs to be carefully controlled so as to avoid merely moving the congestion from one facility to another. State DOT engineers, speaking at various public meetings, have indicated an ideal plan would have approximately 30% of the traffic using express lanes and 70% of the traffic remaining on the existing corridor.
- Another important fact regarding the separation of express and local traffic lanes deals with the impact of traffic signals on mass transit. For any form of mass transit to work, whether bus, bus rapid transit (BRT) or express bus service, traffic lights must be eliminated for the express lanes. Commuters will not ride mass transit if they have no advantage over vehicles.
- There are currently 27 intersections and 24 traffic lights in the 10-mile US 280 corridor that is being studied.
  - The current ALDOT plan proposes to leave all current traffic signaling in place on the existing "at-grade" portions of US 280 while creating express lanes in the center of the highway.
  - The current ReThink 280 plan proposes reducing the number of signalized intersections from 24 to 15. Nothing is said in the plan regarding the method of choosing which current intersections would lose traffic lights.

### **2. How do the plans address the issue of toll?**

- According to ALDOT, the designation of toll lanes is the only feasible way to finance this project. ALDOT Chief Engineer Don Vaughn said at a public meeting in Mountain Brook that he envisioned tolls would average between 20- and 25-cents per mile initially. He also predicted that the State's proposed project would receive approximately 60% of its construction costs back from the collection of tolls. He also indicated that tolls would help pay, over time, for the costs of other construction financing. Without toll revenues the state is on record as saying they cannot finance the project and therefore will not build it.
- ALDOT predicts that, over time, the tolls would pay back both the entire debt service and pay for landscaping and maintenance on the corridor.
- Toll assessment and collection would be administered under the Alabama Toll Road, Bridge & Tunnel Authority. This agency is already established by State law and held its initial meeting on December 22, 2009.

### **3. Do the proposed highway designs accommodate future transit applications - such as bus rapid transit, or even light rail - that are appropriate for this corridor?**

- Yes. By creating express lanes with no traffic lights, the proposed designs can accommodate regular or express bus routes. Express service should be supported by transit-oriented development such as park and ride lots, neighborhood shuttles and downtown circulator service.
- Ridership on express bus routes (often referred to as Bus Rapid Transit, or BRT routes) can be an effective predictor to other more permanent forms of mass transit such as light rail or heavy/commuter rail. During implementation of express bus service, transit providers work with local communities to encourage construction of sidewalks, bike paths, and frequent shuttle service to and from transit stations.
- If the need for light rail service is indicated by bus ridership, existing at-grade lanes (the outside lanes on the ALDOT proposal) would become ideal right of way for the required transit stations and stops on any light rail line. Current R-O-W boundaries on most segments of US 280 are wide enough to accommodate transit stations.
- An important component of any transit plan must be the downtown circulator service. In Birmingham, it is known as the In Town Transit Partnership. This project is ready for construction and has an estimated cost of \$80 million. It includes Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) service along the 18<sup>th</sup> Street corridor from 5-Points South to the Birmingham-Jefferson Convention Center with connection at the Morris Avenue Intermodal Center.

### **4. What impact do the designs have on "at grade" US 280 and the access afforded currently to businesses on the corridor?**

- ALDOT's plan recognizes 27 intersections and 24 traffic lights currently in use on the corridor. It proposes construction of dedicated express lanes, funded by tolls, in the center of the existing median (within the right-of-way). All 24 traffic lights and all current turning movements would remain in place on the at-grade portion of US 280. Access that is currently afforded to businesses and residential entrances would remain.
- The plan proposed by ReThink 280 proposes to reduce the 27 intersections to 15, thus eliminating some traffic lights. Which are to be eliminated is not specified.

**5. What are the safety impacts of the plans? Are barriers in place to eliminate cross-over accidents?**

- ALDOT's express lanes are barrier-protected with 54-inch high, solid side rails. This is a design element that will reduce the threat of "cross-over" traffic accidents and keep east and west directional lanes separated as well.
- No information on barriers, walls, etc. in the ReThink 280 plan.

**6. Concerns have been expressed about various environmental issues. What about noise pollution, auto emissions and light pollution from spill-over lighting?**

- According to Federal regulations, all environmental impacts must be studied on any project that anticipates the use of Federal funds, as this one does. Environmental concerns will be addressed through the NEPA process and will include assessment of impact on water, air, light and noise.
  - The State-proposed design does not require construction of piers in the Cahaba River nor will any construction be done in the floodplain of the river.
  - Noise studies from other highway projects across the country indicate the use of solid side rail barriers (as opposed to no barriers currently on much of the corridor) should actually reduce noise rather than increase it. These are included in the ALDOT plan.
  - Currently concrete grooving technology also should reduce noise in the form of tire whine.
  - Also, the elevating of portions of the corridor will lift noise originators (traffic) above the current noise receptors (homes, businesses), thus also reducing noise levels.
  - Rather than tall light poles with ambient light spilling onto the terrain near the highway, ALDOT proposes LED lights embedded in the side rails of the highway. Light is focused downward on the road surface, thus reducing the potential for adding ambient light pollution to nearby neighborhoods.
  - Existing studies indicate that vehicular emissions have a greater impact on areas surrounding a highway if the traffic is stalled or slow-moving. Emissions from traffic moving at uninterrupted speeds above 40 mph tend to disburse more quickly into the surrounding atmosphere.

**7. What about the cost of acquiring right-of-way to build this project? Will the condemnation of property be required?**

- No with the ALDOT plan. The entire project is to be built within the existing right-of-way and no additional purchase of property is anticipated.
- Supporters of the ReThink 280 plan say their plan doesn't require right-of-way to reconfigure the existing US 280 lanes. The plan does reference the creation of "gateway" commercial districts at unspecified points on the corridor. Since much of the property that adjoins the right-of-way is currently owned privately, this could indicate the need to eliminate some current development and replace it with new streets configured as a "gateway" to commercial districts.

**8. What is the history of the Progress 280 group that I hear so much about in connection with this project? Who were they and are they still active?**

- Progress 280 was a task force of citizens, business leaders and elected officials who studied the problems of congestion on the US 280 corridor for several years. They went to great lengths (and expense) to gauge public sentiment about the elevated highway concept. They determined – and communicated this to Governor Riley in 2007 – that there was strong consensus in favor of an elevated highway for the Eastern segment of the corridor (I-459 to Eagle Point Drive). The task force recommended that the Alabama Department of Transportation (ALDOT) proceed with plans for design and funding feasibility.
- The task force also determined – and also communicated to the Governor – that there was no community consensus regarding the elevated proposal for the Western segment of the corridor (I-459 to the Elton B. Stephens Expressway). However, the task force forwarded a recommendation from the cities of Mountain Brook and Homewood that ALDOT do further study of the intersections in this segment. The State recently released the results of its preliminary work in this segment and the concepts have been presented at various recent public meetings.
- Both proposed solutions are still active. Both would effectively separate commuting or "through" traffic from local traffic. Both would eliminate traffic light "bottlenecks" and lend themselves effectively to transit applications. Both would offset approximately 60% of construction costs through the use of tolls paid by commuters.
- There were 24 members of the Progress 280 Task force. Eight persons represented businesses located in the corridor. The co-chair for the business segment was Hank Collins, a retired Wachovia banker. Eight

residents represented the citizens who live along the corridor. Their co-chair was Della Fancher of Cahaba Heights. The eight political jurisdictions on the corridor (six cities and two counties) were each represented by their Mayor or, in the case of the counties, their Commission Presidents. The co-chair of the public officials sector was former Vestavia Hills Mayor Charles "Scotty" McCallum.

**9. Is research available that would show the nature of the traffic on the US 280 corridor on a given day?**

- A few statistics from ALDOT's "origin and destination" study on US-280's Eastern segment from near I-459 to near Eagle Point Parkway may be useful:
  - 94% of all vehicles in the corridor are passenger cars.
  - 60% of all passenger cars use the corridor primarily to travel to/from work.
  - 92% of all commercial vehicles primarily use the corridor for company business.
  - 67% of all passenger vehicles use the corridor 4+ times per week while only 45% of commercial vehicles use the corridor 4+ times per week.
  - 79% of all vehicles in the corridor contain only one person.
  - Approximately 90% of all the vehicles containing only one person are traveling to/from work.
  - 95% of all vehicles in the corridor contain only one or two persons.
  - 30% of all passenger cars using the corridor also use I-459 on the same trip.
  - 41% of all passenger cars using the corridor reside in the 35242 zip code.