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Birmingham chamber creates coalition with goal of fast-tracking Northern Beltline

Environmental group opposes 52-mile road

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The metro area's leading business organization formed a group Wednesday to push the proposed Northern Beltline on the fast track to open up swaths of land for development and relieve interstate congestion.

The push is sure to meet opposition from an environmental group that has targeted the project.

"The beltline is a transportation project, it is a safety project and it is an economic development project," said Barry Copeland, executive vice president of the Birmingham Regional Chamber of Commerce. "We need this for all of those reasons and we need to make the case for that."

The chamber filed paperwork Wednesday to form the Coalition for Regional Transportation. The nonprofit group's sole mission will be to advocate the completion of the 52-mile road that will eventually connect to Interstate 459 and Interstate 59, forming a northern loop to match I-459 to the south.

Russell Cunningham, the chamber's president, said the group will have its own executive director with an office in the chamber's headquarters. He said the organization is necessary because the project's well-organized opponents have managed to sound alarms over its environmental impact.

"The Coalition for Regional Transportation will also be well-organized and focused, but will also enjoy broad support from local residents, businesses and governmental entities," Cunningham said.

Cunningham said the group will focus its efforts on matching opposition petitions, engineering reports, environmental studies and legal challenges that threaten to change, slow or prevent the project. The group also will lobby government leaders to push for completion.

Opponents have raised questions about the impact of the project on the Cahaba River and Black Warrior River watersheds. Some have called for a re-routing of the beltline and argued that it will generate increased storm water runoff, pollution and noise.

"While the planned route will spur development for some cities, it will degrade or contribute to the decline of other cities and neighborhoods and that needlessly destroy or degrade vital natural resources, including the Cahaba River, a regional drinking water source," said Pat Feemster, president of Save Our Unique River, Communities and Environment, or SOURCE, a group formed to oppose the beltline.

Total cost: \$2.5 billion:

Cunningham said the economic development potential of the beltline is important for the entire region. He said fulfilling that potential can be accomplished while considering environmental and other concerns.

State officials estimate that the total cost of the beltline, in today's dollars, will be \$2.5 billion.

Most of the beltline is in preliminary design with environmental impact documents still to be completed, say Alabama Department of Transportation officials.

ALDOT is working on environmental documents required for the section from Graysville to Interstate 59, and defining a route for the roadway's southern end.

"We can't do anything further on the northern end until the environmental document is complete," said Lance Taylor, head of preconstruction for ALDOT in Birmingham.

The state is buying rights-of-way for, and completing the design of, a 1.5-mile section of the beltline joining Alabama 75 and 79 near Pinson.

The short section is estimated to cost \$100 million, Taylor said, because of the two interchanges and numerous bridges necessary to cross creeks in the area.

Those and other creeks feed into the Cahaba River. Beth Stewart, executive director of the Cahaba River Society, said her organization is not opposed to the beltline but has urged ALDOT to incorporate elements in the design and construction of the interstate to help minimize impact on the watershed.

"We've put forward a lot of very constructive ideas to ALDOT and we essentially have not got any sort of positive response," she said.

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