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p. 15

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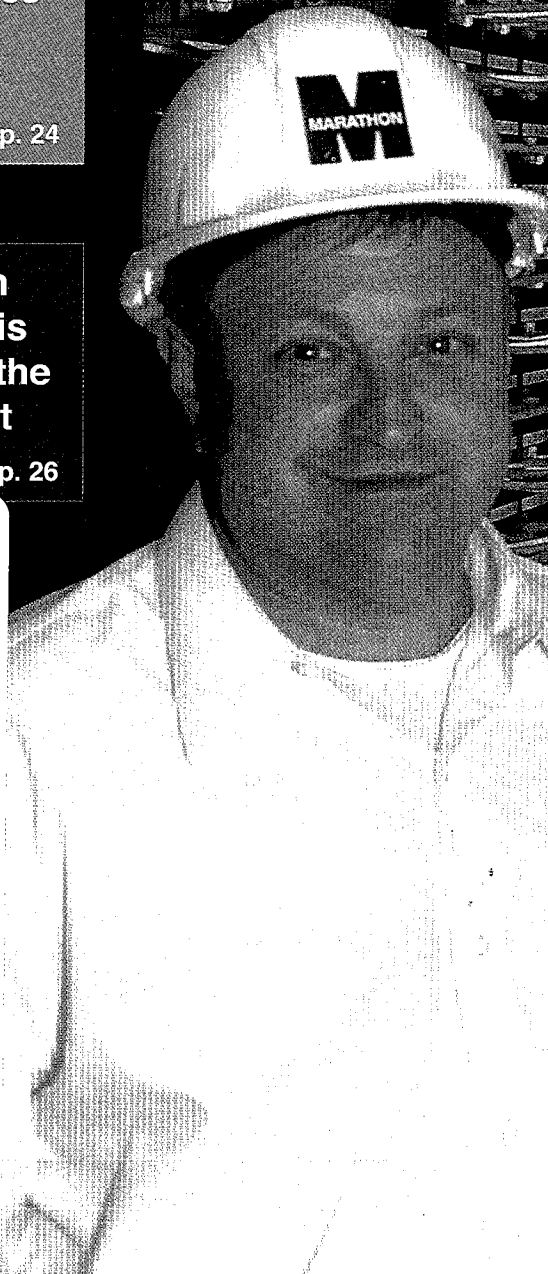
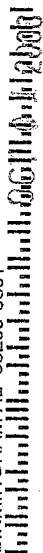
p. 24

**Northern
Beltline is
Back in the
Spotlight**

p. 26

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Opposition to the proposed Northern Beltline route is strong, with several groups citing potential hazards to the area's drinking water sources.

Northern Beltline Back in the Spotlight

by HUGH J. RUSHING

Formation of a non-profit organization supporting a Northern Beltline in Jefferson County is expected to reignite public debate about environmental impacts and costs such a project would have.

The proposed highway project would connect Interstate 59/20 near Bessemer to I-59 near Trussville with a 55-mile, six lanes, limited-access highway. It has been in the planning stages for years. The massive project could cost more than \$3 billion and would bring economic growth to the largely rural and undeveloped northern sectors of the county, its supporters say.

"We are the only major Southern city without a Beltline highway encircling it," says Robert Fowler, attorney with Balch & Bingham, who is active in forming the organization that will be known as the Coalition for Regional Transportation. The Birmingham Regional Chamber of Commerce is in the forefront of the organizing effort for the coalition, along with support of developers, some municipalities and large landowners.

Original studies by the Alabama Department of Transportation stated that economic development was a prime reason for construction of such a corridor in that it would open up large areas of Jefferson County that have been basically stagnant compared with the southern portion of the county.

But that development is what has some groups upset about the entire project. They claim that Alabama's Department of Transportation (ALDOT) pays only lip service to enforcing land disturbance regulations that ALDOT's contractors are supposed to abide by. They worry that sensitive environmental areas in the upper Cahaba watershed and the Locust Fork drainage of the Black Warrior River will be disturbed both by the construction and subsequent development, degrading Birmingham's major drinking water sources with sediment and run-off contaminants.

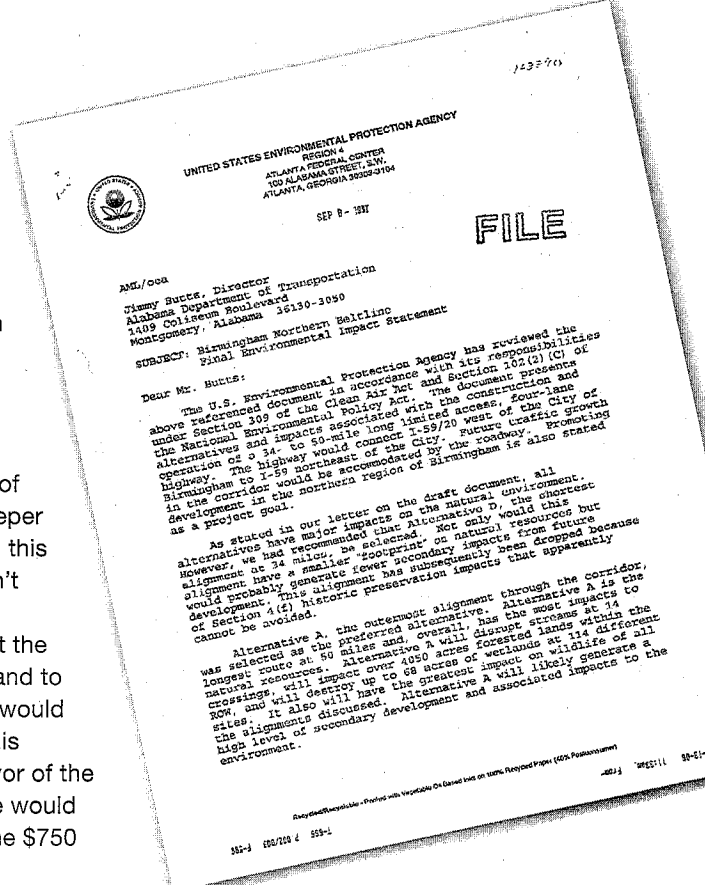
Local environmental officials point to a project in Mobile as a prime example of their concerns about ALDOT. A project to improve narrow and dangerous Highway 98 in western Mobile County (known as Bloody 98) got underway in spite of lawsuits filed by environmental groups and that city's water service authority. After construction was underway, the *Mobile Press-Register* documented huge sediment outflows from the project, which threatened the city's prime drinking water sources and layered mud on top of the pristine Escatawpa River's white sand bottom. The Alabama Department of Environmental Management (ADEM) issued Notices of Violations to ALDOT and switched from inspecting the project monthly to weekly. The *Press-Register* claims that even after \$2.2 million

was spent to control runoff from the site, mud was still entering watershed creeks. The ALDOT office even removed oversight of the project from the local office and ALDOT Director Joe McInnes publicly apologized to Mobile. ALDOT formed a citizens advisory group earlier this year, and is now issuing monthly environmental reports via a special website. In June, it reported eight days of rain totaling 3.25 inches with no sediment loss or violations.

Fowler believes the Mobile dust-up was a precursor to legal challenges to the Birmingham Beltline and that pressure from environmental groups actually can contribute to runoff problems. "Many groups want to reduce land impacts by reducing the width of the right of way — the footprint on which the road is built. The steeper the slope, the more likelihood of erosion and subsequent runoff. In this way, they set a trap for a project and then complain when there isn't room for contractors to reduce runoff."

Fowler believes that local groups must organize in order to get the state's highway dollars to match those of the federal government and to mount a positive campaign on the economic benefits such a road would provide. "Senator (Richard) Shelby has been fantastic in helping this project," Fowler says. "But a coalition of citizens and groups in favor of the project should aid in getting state funds for the project." The state would have to provide 20 percent of the total costs of the project, or some \$750 million.

In a best-case scenario, Fowler says, he believes the project could be underway in three years. Completion would be anyone's guess, but could be as long as 12 to 15 years.



A letter from the EPA to ALDOT highlights that ALDOT chose the longest route for the roadway, which has the most impacts on the natural resources. The EPA had recommended the shortest route.

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TRANSPORTATION

Environmental groups complain that the state has chosen the most lengthy and problematic route — one nearly twice as long as a shorter route, and one that seems to maximize impacts on creeks and streams feeding both the Cahaba and Black Warrior Rivers.

A shorter route, observers say, would cut through existing urban areas and increase greatly land acquisition costs.

Cindy Lowry, who heads the Alabama Rivers Alliance, worries that endangered species will be further threatened

by the road, if it is built. "While we don't have an official position on this project, we do have real concerns that the last unspoiled areas of the county will be negatively impacted by yet another large roadway."

Black Warrior Riverkeeper has come out in official opposition to the project altogether. Nelson Brooke, the organization's executive director, says, "It will contribute to urban sprawl not only in Jefferson County, but into Blount and Walker counties. We need to fix our existing bridges, highways, sewer system and our other infrastructure more than we need another project."

Adam Snyder, who heads the Alabama Conservation Foundation, wonders where additional money will come from for infrastructure development around such a huge project. "You'll need water lines, sewer service, secondary road improvements and a host of other things, which aren't a part of the roadway's costs," Snyder says. "I'm all for economic development, but I'd much rather see in-fill development along Highways 11, 78 and 31 and have decent mass transit for citizens to use to get to work. The environmental impact study provided no evidence that this project is needed for traffic flow or to relieve existing roadways of traffic."

Snyder wonders if the price tag may be just too high. "Seven hundred-and-fifty million dollars of local money is a lot of money and the cities along this route typically just don't have the funds to do the infrastructure improvements that will be needed by such a project. Construction firms can surely benefit from re-development of what we already have in place, in my opinion."

Opposition also has been heard from citizens in Clay and Trussville, two communities in the path of the beltline plan. They've formed "Save Our Unique River, Communities and Environment," or SOURCE, a grassroots effort that hopes to stall the project. SOURCE claims on its website the project will go through residential neighborhoods and historic areas and "will needlessly and extensively impact community, private property and natural resources; including drinking water sources." A petition sponsored by the organization collected 2,200 signatures opposing the planned beltline route.



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