

Press Statement from the Southern Environmental Law Center and Black Warrior Riverkeeper
For Immediate Release: April 21, 2014

Contact:

Gil Rogers, Southern Environmental Law Center, (404) 521-9900 or grogers@selcga.org
Nelson Brooke, Black Warrior Riverkeeper, (205) 288-0223 or nbrooke@blackwarriorriver.org

Press Statement on Northern Beltline Groundbreaking: As Construction Begins, Questions and Doubts Persist about \$5.4-Billion Project

Birmingham, AL –The Southern Environmental Law Center and Black Warrior Riverkeeper released the following statement regarding this morning’s groundbreaking event for construction of the first phase of the Northern Beltline.

“To continue investing in an unnecessary road that will cross and permanently alter streams and wetlands in 125 places, impacting two major sources of local drinking water, is nothing to celebrate,” said Nelson Brooke, the Black Warrior Riverkeeper. “Today’s event is merely a distraction from the fact that the Northern Beltline remains a wasteful and destructive diversion from the Birmingham area’s pressing transportation needs, such as the I-59/20 upgrade and major traffic issues on I-65 and Highway 280.”

ALDOT has only obtained dedicated funding for the first 1.86 mile segment of the road and has not indicated how they will pay for the rest of the project. This is particularly problematic in the wake of an announcement this week that the Federal Highway Trust Fund, which Alabama relies on to fund transportation projects all over the state, is projected to run out of money in four months.

“The lack of funding to get this project from start to finish – much less fund Birmingham’s other transportation needs – further illustrates that the Beltline is a bad idea for the region and a poor investment for the taxpayers,” said Gil Rogers, senior attorney at the Southern Environmental Law Center. “Not only is this project needlessly damaging the Black Warrior and Cahaba River watersheds, but its \$5.4-billion price tag would use all of Alabama’s federal funding for much needed road improvements and maintenance projects around the state. Other states are sensibly shelving large projects that are far less costly than the Beltline in the face of economic realities.”

Background: The proposed Northern Beltline has raised serious environmental, economic, and transportation concerns from local communities, taxpayers, and conservation groups, questioning whether this 35-year project is a good investment for the greater Birmingham region. The 52-mile, 6-lane highway will cost taxpayers \$5.445 billion, or \$104.7 million per mile, while it is only expected to relieve 1-3% of traffic. It will be the most expensive road project in the history of Alabama, and one of the most expensive (per mile) ever built in the nation.

SELC has filed two federal lawsuits on behalf of Black Warrior Riverkeeper in 2011 and 2013. The 2011 suit charged that the responsible agencies failed to provide a necessary analysis of alternative transportation investments as required by law, and to justify the environmental impacts and tremendous economic cost of the Beltline. SELC filed suit in 2013 challenging a permit issued by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for the Northern Beltline’s first phase of construction, charging improper

segmentation of the project and failure to follow the Clean Water Act and the National Environmental Policy Act. Both of these cases remain active and have not yet been decided.

For further questions and more information about why the Northern Beltline would take Alabama in the wrong direction, please visit <http://blackwarriorriver.org/northern-beltline.html> or http://www.southernenvironment.org/cases/northern_beltline.

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About Southern Environmental Law Center:

The Southern Environmental Law Center is a regional nonprofit using the power of the law to protect the health and environment of the Southeast (Virginia, Tennessee, North and South Carolina, Georgia, and Alabama). Founded in 1986, SELC's team of nearly 60 legal and policy experts represent more than 100 partner groups on issues of climate change and energy, air and water quality, forests, the coast and wetlands, transportation, and land use. www.SouthernEnvironment.org

About Black Warrior Riverkeeper:

Black Warrior Riverkeeper's mission is to protect and restore the Black Warrior River and its tributaries. We are a citizen-based nonprofit organization promoting clean water, wildlife habitat, and recreational opportunities throughout the Black Warrior River watershed. To learn more the river and threats to it, visit www.BlackWarriorRiver.org