

P R E S S \* R E L E A S E

Black Warrior Riverkeeper and the Southern Environmental Law Center

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Groups Urge MPO to Drop Northern Beltline From Local Transportation Plan

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Birmingham, AL — Two local groups have asked the Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) to remove the Northern Beltline from the proposed four-year funding plan because of the project's ballooning price tag, questionable economic benefits and harmful effects on the environment.

Black Warrior Riverkeeper and the Southern Environmental Law Center (SELC) are urging the MPO to instead invest in transportation projects that will bring sustainable economic growth to the region in the most cost-effective manner possible.

At about \$4.7 billion—or \$90 million per mile—the Northern Beltline would rank as one of the most expensive highways ever built in the U.S. State taxpayers would pay nearly \$1 billion of the cost, almost equal to Alabama Department of Transportation's statewide construction and maintenance budget for an entire year.

“Birmingham has just been ranked the number two gas guzzling city in the country. Local officials should be pushing the federal and state governments to fund public transit or fix ‘Malfunction Junction’ not build a 52-mile highway far from the city center that will just mean more driving for Birmingham,” said Sarah Stokes, SELC associate attorney.

According to the MPO's Transportation Improvement Program, ALDOT will spend \$81,691,940 on the Northern Beltline during fiscal years 2012 through 2015—almost half of its budget for the entire Birmingham area, severely limiting funding for other, higher priority projects in the six-county region. The state has allocated just 5.3% of funding for bridge projects, 1.5% to maintenance, 0.6% for air quality and traffic mitigation, and a mere 0.03% to safety projects. Transit projects would receive nothing from the state. The funding plan also leaves most localities to foot the bill for sidewalks, pedestrian overpasses and greenways.

In comments filed with the MPO today, Black Warrior Riverkeeper and the Southern Environmental Law Center identify several thriving Southeastern cities that do not have a completed loop, including Greensboro, Winston-Salem, Charleston, Knoxville, Chattanooga, Tampa, and Orlando. The groups point to Greenville, South Carolina and Fort Wayne, Indiana as instructive examples where costly beltlines were built to spur economic growth that never materialized.

Not only is the cost to build the Northern Beltline astronomical, the groups say, the additional costs to localities for new sewer, water, other utilities, school, public safety and road improvements must be considered. Due to the full costs associated with projects like this, many cities – including a number in the Southeast such as Charleston and Nashville – have abandoned or held off on plans for beltways.

By law, the MPO is required to consider projects and strategies that will “protect and enhance the environment” and “promote energy conservation.” Instead, the two environmental groups say, the Northern Beltline will do the exact opposite, promoting urban sprawl and exacerbating air pollution in the region. Further, the Beltline would be built over critical areas of the Black Warrior and Cahaba watersheds, which furnish the region’s drinking water, provide recreation opportunities and supply valuable wildlife habitat for rare and endangered species.

“ALDOT needs to focus its energy on fixing our outdated and crumbling infrastructure, and on more modern methods of transportation that will reduce congestion and pollution as well as promote more efficient commutes,” said Black Warrior Riverkeeper Nelson Brooke. “ALDOT’s inadequate study of this road’s cumulative economic and environmental impacts led to decisions being made in a vacuum without proper planning or public input,” said Brooke.

Earlier this year, Black Warrior Riverkeeper, represented by SELC, filed a lawsuit against ALDOT and the Federal Highway Administration under the National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA) for failing to undertake a full analysis of the indirect and cumulative impacts of the Northern Beltline. The groups claim that since the full comprehensive study has not been completed, the MPO is prematurely allocating significant money to this project for right-of-way acquisition and construction before all the facts are known.

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Black Warrior Riverkeeper ([www.blackwarriorriver.org](http://www.blackwarriorriver.org)) is a citizen-based nonprofit environmental advocacy organization whose mission is to protect and restore the Black Warrior River and its tributaries. A member of Waterkeeper Alliance, Black Warrior Riverkeeper was the Alabama Environmental Council’s 2007 Conservation Organization of the Year and the American Canoe Association’s 2008 Green Paddle Award winner. Nelson Brooke, Riverkeeper, won the Alabama Rivers Alliance’s 2010 River Hero Award. American Rivers included the Black Warrior on its 2011 list of “Most Endangered Rivers.”

The Southern Environmental Law Center is a regional conservation organization 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 40 legal 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.

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