

Northern Beltline is too expensive

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Sarah Stokes, Special

Birmingham just received the unfortunate news that our city ranks among the worst metropolitan areas for commuters – 347th out of 373 in the South.

The Regional Planning Commission has a plan to fix Birmingham's congestion, but unfortunately, we can't afford it.

Instead, the Alabama Department of Transportation wants to build the \$4.7 billion Northern Beltline, which the RPC predicts will only reduce overall traffic by 1 to 3 percent and will likely have no impact on the most congested roadways south of town.

And that's if the project, with a 30-year construction timeline, is ever completed at all. No wonder the RPC has ranked the Northern Beltline 36th in priority among Birmingham's transportation investment needs.

Indeed, the staggering cost of the Beltline alone is nearly \$1 billion more than it would cost to address all of the following unfunded key projects in Birmingham: widening Interstates 65, 20 and 59, fixing Malfunction Junction (the intersection with the highest accident rate in the state), and ongoing maintenance and improvements for at least 50 other major highways and connections around the area.

Proponents of the Northern Beltline claim that the 52-mile highway outside of Birmingham would create jobs and growth for the region. Unfortunately, these job numbers have been highly inflated and any job created would cost taxpayers approximately \$450,000 per job.

But fixing the congestion on our existing highways would also create jobs – both construction jobs and permanent jobs that will be produced by attracting development to a city that has flowing traffic arteries.

The Northern Beltline will not provide the economic growth that our area needs. ALDOT admits that the road would only spark, at best, a 1.5 percent population change in the area when (if) it is completed decades from now.

For \$4.7 billion, only 2,200 more people may move to the area near the proposed Beltline, and these people will probably simply relocate from elsewhere in metro Birmingham.

Additionally, it is a myth that all other cities already have a beltway around their city that generates growth – Orlando, Knoxville, Tampa and Chattanooga are examples of Southeastern metropolitan areas that have grown and flourished economically without beltlines. And many cities with complete beltways are struggling economically. There is simply no correlation.

The Beltline is a 1960s-era solution to 21st century economic challenges. It is the most expensive road in Alabama history, at \$90 million per mile, and one of the most expensive anywhere in the country.

This price ignores costs of sewer infrastructure and other investments that will need to be made to actually produce any growth, as well as the costs of degrading the headwaters of the rivers that provide Birmingham with its water supply.

And this is on top of Jefferson County's ongoing bankruptcy challenges and our country's inability to reconcile its ballooning national debt (making longterm federal funding for the Beltline highly doubtful).

The likely scenarios are that taxpayers pay an even more outrageous bill to cover all these costs – or the Beltline gets abandoned mid-construction.

Try to get a Beltline supporter to discuss the merits of the road in light of these factors. You can't.

Then, look at who the proponents are and which companies stand to be enriched by this massive boondoggle.

That tells you all you need to know as to why they support it. Before building the most expensive road project in Alabama's history, isn't it time for a serious discussion to determine the best transportation investments for our tax dollars?

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