

The Birmingham News

U.S. Sen. Richard Shelby pledges federal aid for Northern Beltline project near Birmingham, AL

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WASHINGTON - The Northern Beltline project was endorsed Thursday by U.S. Sen. Richard Shelby, who said he will help corral federal money for the nearly \$3 billion highway around Birmingham's northern and western suburbs.

"It makes all the sense in the world," Shelby said. "I will do everything I can. We're going to make it happen."

The 52 miles of pavement would complete the loop that Interstate 459 started around the southern suburbs, but the project has drawn criticism as a threat to the environmental health of the river basins through which it runs.

Shelby, addressing about 50 members of the Birmingham Regional Chamber of Commerce in Washington, said it would be a major boost to economic development.

"It could tie all of Jefferson County in and open up northern Jefferson County and western Jefferson County for development," Shelby said.

The road's prospects for completion accelerated five years ago, when Shelby had it declared an extension of the Corridor X interstate between Memphis and Birmingham, which qualified it for federal funds from the Appalachian Development Highway System.

The Northern Beltline is the chamber's top federal legislative priority, and advocates will be pushing for state and federal funding.

"We're the only regional city that doesn't have a circumferential road," said Russell Cunningham, chief executive and president of the chamber group.

The business, civic and government leaders were in Washington for two days of meetings, mostly with members of Alabama's congressional delegation. In addition to the Northern Beltline, the group is asking for \$10 million to form the Drug Discovery Institute, a partnership between UAB and Southern Research Institute to try to shorten the time between research breakthroughs and production of life-saving drugs.

The group's wish list also includes a host of health care, tax, transportation, transit and water resources projects.

Shelby also warned the chamber group that resolving Jefferson County's sewer debt crisis is a local problem and the county should not seek federal help.

"I'm not a bail-out person and I wouldn't support that," Shelby said. "It is something the local people ought to work out."

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