

For immediate release: 10/9/2024

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New report questions impact, economics of Northern Beltline highway project
Proposed new section of the \$5+ billion project will destroy over 10 miles of streams and tributaries north of Birmingham, offer little economic benefit

BIRMINGHAM, Ala.—A new analysis continues to cast doubt on the economic benefits of the most expensive road project in Alabama history.

A team of economists with the University of North Carolina [found significant flaws](#) in the 2010 analysis the Alabama Department of Transportation (ALDOT) uses to justify its controversial 52-mile highway project. The economists found that even if the highway is completed in sixty years as predicted, projected population and economic growth will remain low. The entire Northern Beltline project comes with a more than \$5 billion price tag and taxpayers will also be on the hook for additional costs, including secondary roads, expanded sewer systems, expanded first-responder services, and other infrastructure needs.

Conceived mainly as an economic development tool in the 1960s, the project will create a limited number of jobs, mainly in construction, with no promise of long-term growth for the region. The new report found that because of increased construction costs, the estimated cost per construction job is now a whopping \$845,453. Based upon ALDOT's own studies, the report also found that if the project is ever finished, any permanent job created will cost taxpayers \$2.3 million per job. The new report points out that trying to use highway projects to spur economic development is last century thinking that doesn't work.

The team found that any small amount of economic growth that may occur along the Northern Beltline corridor will only pull economic growth from other parts of the Birmingham metropolitan area.

“This is a literal and figurative road to nowhere,” said Sarah Stokes, a senior attorney in SELC's Birmingham office. “There is a reason this project was proposed in the 1960s and still isn't built—it's harmful, unnecessary, and a complete waste of taxpayer's money.”

Last week, SELC [submitted comments](#) to ALDOT on behalf of Black Warrior Riverkeeper opposing the project. ALDOT has begun the planning to build the eastern section of the Beltline from I-65 to I-59. ALDOT projects more than 500 residents and businesses will need to relocate because of highway construction. There has not been an environmental impact analysis of the project in 27 years. Since that time northern Alabama and elements of the Beltline project have changed significantly, yet there has been no consideration of how those changes may affect the project.

“The proposed Northern Beltline encourages a boom and bust economic model that is outdated, destructive, and predatory,” said Nelson Brooke, Black Warrior Riverkeeper. “Instead of endeavoring sustainable infill growth in areas already available for redevelopment, the project’s proponents are pushing a model that would pull investment and interest away from existing developed areas while promoting destruction of sensitive environments such as Turkey Creek – a lose-lose scenario.”

ALDOT should focus taxpayer money and resources on the many highway projects across the state that are desperately needed to reduce congestion and make roads safer. The Northern Beltline was not on a Business Council of Alabama backed [report](#) on Alabama’s 50 highway projects needed most to support economic growth. Every project on that list could be completed for less than the cost of the Northern Beltline. Construction of the Northern Beltline was ranked 36th in priority by the Regional Planning Commission of Greater Birmingham.

For Nelson Brooke’s photograph of Turkey Creek Nature Preserve, a beloved recreation destination and endangered species habitat downstream of the Northern Beltline’s proposed path, [click here](#).

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The Southern Environmental Law Center is one of the nation’s most powerful defenders of the environment, rooted in the South. With a long track record, SELC takes on the toughest environmental challenges in court, in government, and in our communities to protect our region’s air, water, climate, wildlife, lands, and people. Nonprofit and nonpartisan, the organization has a staff of 200, including more than 100 attorneys, and is headquartered in Charlottesville, Va., with offices in Asheville, Atlanta, Birmingham, Chapel Hill, Charleston, Nashville, Richmond, and Washington, D.C.
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Black Warrior Riverkeeper’s mission is to protect and restore the Black Warrior River and its tributaries. The nonprofit organization promotes clean water for the sake of public health, recreation, and wildlife habitat throughout the Black Warrior River watershed.
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