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Speedup announced of Currituck Bridge date

By: Tony Sylvester

Construction of the long-awaited Mid-Currituck Bridge is scheduled to begin three years from now and the projected cost has been reduced to about half of what it was, according to state Senator Marc Basnight (D-Dare).

In a recent letter to the president of the local "Build the Bridge -- Preserver Our Roads" committee, Basnight said that "preliminary cost estimates show that a three-lane bridge, with one lane being reversible for high traffic volumes, will cost around \$460 million."

Back in 1989, when the General Assembly first authorized construction of the bridge by the Department of Transportation, the estimate was \$97 million.

But with constant delays caused by "environmental permitting problems, permitting agencies' reluctance for approval, and funding shortfalls," as Basnight explained in his letter to Gwen Cruickshanks of Point Harbor, the expected cost escalated.

Just last month it was said to be \$306 to \$822 million with construction starting in the fall of 2013.

"The most appealing information," Basnight wrote after meeting with the director of the NC Turnpike Authority, is that bridge is now "slated" to begin in 2010 and be "completed in 2014."

It isn't entirely clear what specifically produced the speedup and cost reduction other than, perhaps, a little political pressure applied by Sen. Basnight and Rep. Bill Owens who, in the presence of Currituck County commissioners, met in Basnight's office two weeks ago with Turnpike Authority boss David Joyner.

Certainly a major factor was creation of the Authority itself in August of 2005 when the governor signed into law House Bill 275, as approved by the Senate.

The Authority, under an act passed by Congress, can expedite construction of projects such as the Mid-Currituck Bridge by acting independently in issuing bonds, hiring contractors and collecting and assessing tolls on its bridges and highways to help defray cost,

There's more to it, of course, but as Basnight outlined the Currituck Bridge project in his letter shortly after the session with Joyner, "with an \$8 peak toll during season, and a \$6 off-peak toll, the Turnpike will be able to cover almost \$260 million" of the projected \$460 million cost.

"It is anticipated that the remaining \$200 million will be funded through a public-private partnership between the Authority and private investors. The Authority is also working on discounted tolls for citizens and residents who pass daily and use a form of electronic toll collection."

Further, Sen. Basnight wrote, "There are also ideas of being able to include passes with travel packages so visitors will not have to bother with toll booths. I have requested the Authority look at the construction of a multi-use path for bicyclists and day trippers, as long as it does not delay the opening of the bridge.:"

Delays in construction of a Mid-Currituck Bridge are an old story but hope is eternal. Basnight concluded his March 1 letter by saying, "I appreciate this opportunity to share this wonderful news with the people of Currituck County, and to thank the Turnpike Authority for working so hard to finally make this long-awaited bridge a reality."

The reality is what many northern Outer Banks residents and visitors have long awaited.