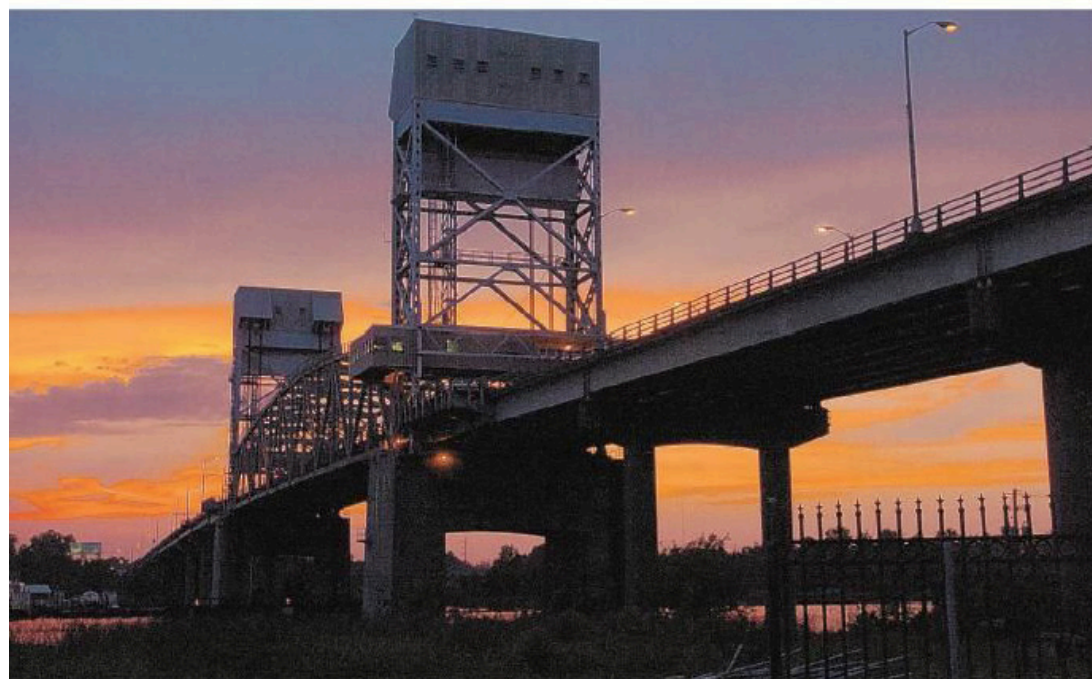


WITH SKYWAY PROJECT ON HOLD AND TRAFFIC GETTING WORSE, OFFICIALS LOOKING FOR WAYS OF ...

# BRIDGING THE GAP



Opened in 1969, the Cape Fear Memorial Bridge is struggling to carry its current load of 52,700 vehicles a day. Traffic on the bridge is forecast to jump to 113,700 vehicles a day by 2035 if another crossing is not built, and will increase to 81,600 cars a day even if one is built. *StarNews file photos*

## ‘Skyway’ becomes a dirty word as planners look for cheaper alternatives

BY ADAM WAGNER  
adam.wagner@StarNewsOnline.com

As the Cape Fear Skyway project continues to gather dust, planners and local officials – not to mention motorists – are increasingly eager to find a solution to the growing traffic overload between Leland and Wilmington.

City and transportation leaders hope that a Nov. 26 workshop at Wilmington City Hall will kick the decision-making process into gear.

### Sky-high price

Organizers are hesitant now to use the Skyway label for any future construction.

“The name Cape Fear Skyway gives the stigma of a \$1 billion bridge, and what we’re trying to do is develop the best transportation solution that improves the mobility and safety throughout the region,” said Mike Kozlosky, executive director of the Wilmington

### BRIDGE RELIEF OPTIONS

#### NEW SOUTHERN CROSSING

The Cape Fear Skyway project seems to be dead in the water because of its high cost. But some think a new high-rise bridge south of town is still a possibility.

#### ENHANCED MEMORIAL BRIDGE

Replacing or adding onto the Cape Fear Memorial Bridge would be cheaper than a high-rise project, and Leland officials support that. But Wilmington leaders worry about the impact of additional traffic on the downtown area.

#### INTERIM MEASURES

Two projects already in the works – completion of the Interstate 140 bypass into Brunswick County and the six-laning of the causeway between Wilmington and Leland – will do a lot to ease the traffic crunch. But officials agree something more will still be needed.

Metropolitan Planning Organization.

“The end project – if it’s a new location facility – may not be a cable-stay bridge, or it might be a lesser project than the

\$1 billion bridge that everybody has in mind.”

Recent maintenance assured that the Cape Fear Memorial Bridge will last at least 40 more years, officials say.

At the same time, though, it demonstrated that the bridge is struggling to carry its current load of 52,700 vehicles a day.

Traffic on the Memorial Bridge is forecast to jump to 113,700 vehicles a day by 2035 if another crossing is not built, and will increase to 81,600 cars a day even if one is.

“Even simple maintenance (on the bridge) can cause some hardship for the communities in the area,” said Bobby Lewis, the DOT’s chief of staff.

Construction on the Interstate 140 bypass, expected to wrap up in 2016, could ease traffic on the Memorial Bridge and the causeway between Leland and Wilmington.

“The I-140 bypass, when that’s completed, will drastically change how traf-

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# BRIDGE

Continued from 1A

fic travels through the region, and you will see some immediate relief on the causeway from that. If nothing else, when there is a problem on the causeway, people will have another means to cross and get into New Hanover," Leland Town Manager David Hollis said.

But it isn't expected to be a cure-all.

## Location issues

One solution gaining momentum is to build near the Cape Fear Memorial Bridge, by adding four lanes to it, building a new four-lane bridge beside it or replacing it altogether with an eight-lane structure.

During a presentation to the Transportation Advisory Committee in February 2011, the DOT said replacing the Memorial Bridge would cost about \$475 million. Tying a new bridge in with the coming Interstate 140 bypass to create a loop would cost about \$860 million.

Wilmington leaders aren't totally on board with enhancing the Memorial Bridge.

"That would mean more traffic is funneled into the city of Wilmington because the traffic projections aren't going to decrease, they're only going to increase," said Bill Saffo, Wilmington's mayor. "One of the reasons to have the crossing farther down the stream was to break some of that traffic flow up instead of having it in one location."

Leland officials threw their support behind another crossing near the Memorial Bridge in August after it became clear that the Skyway project was unlikely.

"It would be four lanes in and four lanes out," Hollis said, adding that the new structure could then be a drawbridge akin to the Memorial Bridge instead of a

pricier high-rise bridge. "I don't think it would be a heavy impact on any area to go ahead and do that."

But Wilmington officials believe they would feel the brunt of a bridge next to the Memorial Bridge, particularly in the area of South Third Street between Dawson and Wooster streets.

"That whole corridor between Wooster and Dawson could possibly be eliminated, and you're talking about an expensive proposition to buy all those people's houses," Saffo said.

Other leaders expressed concern that though another crossing near the Memorial Bridge makes sense for the region, gaining a larger foothold for the bridge on the Wilmington side of the Cape Fear could prove difficult.

"The location is perfectly situated in the heart of the region," said Brenda Bozeman, Leland's mayor. "... But will this be a tug of war with those who want to use Wilmington's waterfront for other than a bridge access? It's developers' prized real estate."

While Wilmington officials are concerned more traffic near the Memorial Bridge could damage existing homes and businesses, leaders on the Brunswick County side of the river are worried that building a bridge in a different location could cramp their growth.

A bridge built on the proposed northern Skyway route, traveling from the northern end of N.C. 133 to U.S. 421 at Shipyard Boulevard, for instance, would send a new highway slicing through Leland.

"The way they have it planned now - with the route running through Leland - isn't very good for us as a town and isn't good for the region as the town continues

to grow," Hollis said.

Leland officials are also skeptical that northern Brunswick residents would choose to use a Skyway route instead of the existing Memorial Bridge.

"Their ride would take them miles out of the way to access the crossing. Then there are the tolls," Bozeman said. "Where's the terminus? They are deposited at Shipyard Boulevard. From Shipyard, if they are heading to work in Wilmington, they would have to traverse Independence Boulevard or - and here comes the inconceivable notion - the already congested and dangerous College Road."

The southern Skyway route, connecting to Independence Boulevard at U.S. 421, has also received some support from officials.

Wilmington leaders believed the plans were gaining enough traction that they made improvements to both Carolina Beach Road and Independence Boulevard.

"The ideal crossing was the one at Independence and Carolina Beach Road where it came in. That's an area that had some development, but a lot of development on that corridor was closer to the port," Saffo said. "That was the specific area that was designated."

The widening of Independence would have been necessary, though, even without the possibility of a bridge looming in the near future, said Laura Padgett, a Wilmington councilwoman and chairwoman of the Transportation Advisory Committee.

## Prohibitive price

The breadth of the river near the proposed crossing and its proximity to the state port have forced conversation about any project there to revolve primarily around a cable stay bridge, the cost of which has repeatedly prohibited construction

Officials had pursued the Skyway project since 2006, but it stalled because of escalating cost projections. Tolls on the bridge wouldn't cover the full cost, leaving a shortfall of \$58 million annually for 40 years.

"It's a large span of travel way down there across the river..." Hollis said. "That limits the type of bridge you can build."

DOT is trying to cut costs through a process called value engineering.

Padgett said that means looking "twice and maybe thrice at some of the features and some of the designs to see if there's a less expensive way to do it."

Whatever solution ends up being chosen, DOT officials promise to be thorough in their evaluation, including upcoming environmental studies.

"Each project has an environmental impact, and that's not just limited to the fish and the wetlands and the streams," Lewis said. "If you go in there and you're going to do a (Skyway-type) of crossing, because of the height of the bridge, you could impact more city blocks or have a community justice issue. It's everything under the sun considered."

A new, wider approach presents a welcome change for local leaders, some of whom felt they were being tied to a Skyway project from the beginning without other options being taken into serious consideration.

"All the river crossings and infrastructure need to be evaluated as they relate to one another. ... Focusing on one project does not address the entire scope of the problem," Bozeman said. "It needs to be one integrated plan."

A final decision concerning the best path forward isn't expected anytime soon.

"We're able to get feedback at this meeting on what places we need to address from a local perspective," Lewis said. "We as a DOT from the state perspective understand the federal and state process to get the project down to one route, but the locals know how they want to grow - or how they've already grown - and what it's going to take to handle the growth."

Organizers are hesitant now to use the 'Skyway' label for any future construction.