



I-77 South Express Lanes

February 2026

Project Overview

- NCDOT's priority is to deliver transportation improvements, in partnership with the region, that respect the history of the neighborhoods along the corridor and provide long-lasting community benefits.
- In partnership with CRTPO, NCDOT has worked on the I-77 South Express Lanes project **since 2007** when it was a concept identified in the Fast Lanes Study.
- Per state law, toll projects in NC must be requested and approved by the local planning organization.
- **In 2014**, the project was added to CRTPO's 2040 Metropolitan Transportation Plan and entered the State Transportation Improvement Program.
 - 11-mile project that adds two express lanes in each direction from the S.C. state line to I-277/N.C. 16 (Brookshire Freeway)
- Project purpose: manage congestion by providing an **option for reliable travel times** and improve traffic operations by increasing travel speeds and throughput along I-77.
- With current traffic demand (160,000 vehicles/day), travel times on this segment range from 10 minutes to nearly an hour depending on time of day/direction of travel.
- **Crash rates for this segment are 2.5x higher than the statewide average for urban interstates.**

Funding Available

- Cost estimate is over \$3 billion. NCDOT has up to \$600 million available to use for this project, and the rest of the cost will be privately financed. **Per state law, those funds cannot be transferred to a standalone transit project.**
- Because this is a toll project, per state law, CRTPO is eligible to receive **\$100 million in Bonus Allocation funding** to be used for projects in Mecklenburg County.
- If the project were not to move forward, the state funds (\$600 million) would go back into NCDOT's statewide fund and distributed to projects around the state with no guarantee the funds would stay in the

- Charlotte region. The additional Bonus Allocation funds (\$100 million) would be lost.
- NCDOT has coordinated closely with the City of Charlotte to incorporate **bicycle and pedestrian improvements** in the project design, based off local plans and **community priorities**.
 - As prioritized by a CRTPO/NCDOT working group, **CATS transit will use the express lanes for free** and benefit from reliable travel times and more efficient bus mobility.
 - Express lanes affordability and optimizing utilization are also CRTPO working group priorities.
 - Vehicles with at least three people inside (HOV3+) can use the express lanes for free.
 - **Toll rate caps will be implemented**, which is not currently on I-77 North.
 - A discount program will also be available for low-income residents.

Project Development Process

- When I-77 was originally planned decades ago, the federal National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) did not exist.
- NCDOT is committed to doing things differently as we follow the NEPA process to evaluate neighborhood connectivity, air quality, noise, water resources and wildlife and identify ways to avoid or mitigate impacts where possible.
- The **project design is still in draft form (10-15% complete)** as NCDOT continues minimizing impacts.
- Public feedback received indicated a design with fewest impacts possible is preferred, which is why NCDOT is continuing with elevated design instead of traditional widening, which had significantly more impacts to historic neighborhoods, cemeteries, and Irwin Creek.
- **The elevated option eliminates all impacts to homes in the McCrorey Heights, Wesley Heights and Biddleville neighborhoods** (41 homes would be impacted with traditional widening). It also reduces impacts to Frazier Park.

- Current elevated design (North of Belk) constructs express lanes over or to the side of the existing interstate for 1.5 miles.
- NCDOT is continuing to listen and have conversations with the community as we **explore ways to minimize impacts**.
- Private companies will also be incentivized to further minimize impacts as part of **project procurement, which is ongoing through 2027**.

Tunneling

- Engineering experts looked at a potential tunnel option in 2024 and found that cost of a tunnel(s) is too expensive to build/maintain and can come with more construction risks.
- NCDOT reviewed and compared other major tunnel projects such as the Big Dig (Boston) and Alaskan Way (Seattle).
- Based on those comparisons, **relocating I-77 underground would cost billions of dollars per mile** (10-20x NCDOT's annual capital budget).
- Additionally, maintenance costs would be more than \$50 million a year (nearly all of NCDOT Division 10's annual maintenance fund for bridge and roadway maintenance, potholes, etc.).
- With the scope and scale of this project, an underground option would be more impactful to existing properties and infrastructure during the construction process as a result of digging a tunnel.
- Relocating I-77 underground could also take several decades to complete.
- The Big Dig (Boston) tunnel was 8 miles long and took nearly 16 years to complete. The Alaskan Way Tunnel (Seattle) completed in 2019 was just under two miles long and took nearly six years to complete.

Local Partnership and Engagement

- In October 2024, CRTPO and NCDOT created a working group to identify project priorities and develop key project contract terms.
- Some project priorities include:
 - Provide benefits to transit
 - Optimize utilization of express lanes and general-purpose lanes with toll rate caps
 - Encourage a competitive procurement process

- Increase transparency during all phases of the project (construction, operations, etc.)
- In 2025, NCDOT presented project information at nearly 30 small group meetings and two formal public meetings, reaching nearly 2,000 people.
- Engagement will continue throughout the design and procurement process.
- NCDOT is adding more options to meet:
 - **Community engagement center** (staffed for questions and feedback)
 - Recurring **office hours** for 1-on-1 conversations (in person and virtual)
 - More information about the community engagement center and office hours **will be released soon**.
- NCDOT will continue to work closely with the community to listen and explore additional community benefits that reconnect rather than divide.

Community Benefits

- CATS transit, emergency vehicles and HOV3+ will have toll-free access to express lanes and reliable travel times
- A discount program for low-income residents will be established
- Modernizing pedestrian friendly designs on bridges, overpasses and cross streets where interchanges are reconstructed
- Fair and flexible strategies to lessen toll rates (toll rate caps) and optimize utilization will be in place to manage congestion by those using the express lanes

Project Schedule*



*Schedule is subject to change

For more project information



Scan to visit the project website
<https://www.ncdot.gov/projects/i-77-south-express-lanes>

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