

# NORTHERN BELTLINE FACTS

- The proposed 1960 Northern Beltline north and west of Birmingham has raised serious questions from local communities, taxpayers, and conservation groups about whether this project is best for greater Birmingham, from an environmental, economic, and transportation perspective. The 52-mile, 4-lane highway would cost taxpayers approximately \$5 billion, or \$96.3 million per mile.<sup>1</sup> It would be the most expensive road project in the history of Alabama, and one of the most expensive (per mile) ever built in the nation.
- ALDOT began construction on the Northern Beltline in 2014, and only the draining and grading of a 1.34 mile section has been completed. All construction stopped in 2016.<sup>2</sup> The paving and bridges on this small section still have not been done. ALDOT's transportation plans indicate that the entire Beltline would take approximately 60-75 years to complete from today.<sup>3</sup>
- Birmingham's air quality, water quality, forested acreage, and wetlands would all be degraded by this road. Specifically, the Northern Beltline would cross and permanently alter Black Warrior and Cahaba river tributaries in 90 places, and it would impact 35 different wetlands and thousands of football fields' worth of forest. Of particular concern is the fact that the Beltline would impact the tops of both the Cahaba and Black Warrior River watersheds, primary drinking water sources for Birmingham and surrounding communities. The current proposed route is the most environmentally destructive of the seven routes initially considered by the Alabama Department of Transportation.
- If completed, the road would only relieve 1-3% of traffic on I-20/59 through downtown Birmingham, and it will not reroute significant truck traffic. In fact, traffic will increase on the heavily-congested section of I-59 through Trussville and Argo.<sup>4</sup>
- TRIP, a national transportation research organization, completed a list of Alabama's 50 highway projects needed most to support economic growth; the Northern Beltline was not on the list.<sup>5</sup> (The Business Council of Alabama endorsed this list.<sup>6</sup>) And in fact, all of the projects on that list could be completed for less than the cost of the Northern Beltline.
- Construction of the Northern Beltline has been ranked 36<sup>th</sup> in priority by the Birmingham Regional Planning Commission,<sup>7</sup> yet it is being prioritized by the Birmingham Business Alliance over much-needed fixes for current traffic and safety problems.
- Gobankingrates.com, US streets blog, and US Public Interest Research Group, rated the highway as one of the seven worst ways in the country that taxpayers could use their money.<sup>8</sup>
- Any development that occurs along the Beltline route will likely not be "new" growth, but rather a redistribution of growth, capital, and jobs from older developed areas, producing empty homes, storefronts, and blight as has already occurred in parts of the Birmingham region. Even ALDOT has predicted that the road, when completed decades from now, will only attract 2,200 residents and 2,800 permanent jobs in the vicinity of the 52-mile corridor.<sup>9</sup>
- A small handful of corporate landowners in the path of the road stand to gain financially. They, along with road building, mining, development, and utility interests, are driving the support for this \$5 billion project along this chosen route, which has little transportation benefit for the region.

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<sup>1</sup> FHWA, Cost to Complete, <https://fhwaapps.fhwa.dot.gov/foisp/publicActive.do> (last visited May 10, 2023). (20.4 miles will cost \$1.966 billion (\$96.3 million per mile); which means that 52 miles will cost approximately \$5 billion.)

<sup>2</sup> Birmingham Business Journal, Lack of Funding Again Delays Construction of Northern Beltline, March 28, 2019; <https://www.bizjournals.com/birmingham/news/2019/03/28/lack-of-funding-againdelays-construction-of.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Regional Planning Commission, 2050 Regional Transportation Plan, May 2023 Draft [https://www.dropbox.com/s/8rep5id5qiqn7m3/RTP%202050\\_20230414.pdf?dl=0](https://www.dropbox.com/s/8rep5id5qiqn7m3/RTP%202050_20230414.pdf?dl=0) (last visited May 10, 2023) (40% is planned to be built in 25 years).

<sup>4</sup> Regional Planning Commission of Greater Birmingham. *Public Involvement Meeting Documentation for 2035 RTP*. April 2010, p. 4-17; Birmingham Northern Beltline Termini Analysis, September 1993, p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> TRIP, The Top 50 Highway Projects to Support Economic Growth and Quality of Life in Alabama, Feb. 2016, [http://www.tripnet.org/docs/AL\\_Economic\\_Development\\_TRIP\\_Report\\_February\\_2016.pdf](http://www.tripnet.org/docs/AL_Economic_Development_TRIP_Report_February_2016.pdf) (last visited May 10, 2023)

<sup>6</sup> BCA, <https://www.bcatoday.org/local-and-national-speakers-highlight-alabamas-road-needs-and-solutions/>, Feb. 12, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Regional Planning Commission of Greater Birmingham, *Birmingham 2035 Regional Transportation Plan*, April 2010, Appendix 5D.

<sup>8</sup> Gobankingrates.com, April 14, 2018; Highway Boondoggles 2020: Birmingham's Northern Beltline – Streetsblog USA, <https://usa.streetsblog.org/2020/12/23/meet-2020s-worst-highway-boondoggles-birmingham-northern-beltline-alabama/> Dec. 23, 2020 (last visited May 10, 2023); Birmingham Northern Beltline, Alabama | U.S. PIRG, <https://uspirg.org/feature/usp/birmingham-northern-beltline-alabama>, Dec. 2020 (last visited May 10, 2023).

<sup>9</sup> ALDOT, FHWA, Final Environmental Impact Statement Reevaluation, March 2012, Appendix L.

- The large price tag of the road does not take into account the extra cost of sewer and other infrastructure that must be installed for the area to be developed. The additional significant costs of extending water lines, power lines, local roads, public safety services, and schools have yet to be factored into the Beltline's overall price.
- To improve regional connectivity for Jefferson County and create jobs, ALDOT should consider more functional alternatives like extending Corridor X to I-59 instead of sinking well over \$5 billion into the Beltline.
- While ALDOT has some obtained IJA funding for developing the Appalachian Development Highway System, this funding could be spent on other ADHS projects, such as Corridor V in Huntsville and Corridor X. According to the ADHS Cost to Complete, Alabama still desires to upgrade Corridor V (State Route 2) and build a new interchange on this road.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, Corridor X (Interstate 22) needs an upgrade to an 8-lane section and a welcome center.<sup>11</sup>
- If spent on the Northern Beltline, this IJA funding and other appropriations will only build about 10 miles of the 52-mile highway, and Alabama will be stuck with a road to nowhere.

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<sup>10</sup> ADHS, Appalachian Development Highway System - 2021 Cost-to-Complete Estimate Report, March 2021, <https://www.arc.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/ADHS-2021-Cost-to-Complete-Estimate-Report-March-2021-FINAL-1.pdf>. (last visited May 10, 2023).

<sup>11</sup> *Id.*