

The Northern Beltline: Not a Done Deal

Whether to move forward with the proposed Northern Beltline is one of the most important decisions for the future well-being of Birmingham and Alabama. **The Southern Environmental Law Center and Black Warrior Riverkeeper support decisions that will bring sustainable economic prosperity to the Birmingham community.**

The Alabama Department of Transportation has not done its job in making sure the Northern Beltline is the best investment of the public's transportation dollars. The project raises several questions that warrant further review:

- The price tag for the road has mushroomed to \$4.7 billion, with almost \$1 billion of that coming from state funds. The state portion is close to ALDOT's annual road construction budget *for all of Alabama*.
- This project has been on the books since the 1960s without ever being objectively compared with other transportation alternatives that could bring economic prosperity to Birmingham, such as improvement of existing roads and investment in transit.
- Around the country, highways like the proposed Northern Beltline often suck economic prosperity away from the urban center. Rather than create growth, beltlines simply redistribute it, often in the form of sprawl development that does not improve quality of life. If an east-west connection is needed in northern Jefferson County, a six-lane interstate highway is not the optimal solution. A parkway design with limited access would better serve the purpose of adding connectivity while reducing the potential for sprawl and environmental harm.
- The Regional Planning Commission of Greater Birmingham has given the Northern Beltline a low ranking on its long-range transportation priority list. In addition to being a poor way of generating economic prosperity, the project falls short in providing an effective transportation corridor.

- Sprawl development, as well as construction of the road itself, will degrade water quality in the Black Warrior and Cahaba river basins, both of which serve as drinking water supplies for Birmingham.
- Traffic from the Northern Beltline and resulting sprawl will contribute to ongoing air quality problems in the Birmingham area.

Given these persistent questions, **it only makes sense for ALDOT to do what it should have done years ago, which is study all of the environmental impacts of this project, along with the alternatives that would satisfy the project's stated purpose of generating economic development.** Rather than do what the law requires, ALDOT blindly proceeds with work on the Northern Beltline, locking taxpayers in to a nearly \$5 billion project whose benefits and costs have never been adequately weighed.

What's worse, the agency has chopped the project into arbitrary sections to evaluate each one individually, in violation of the law. We have tried for years to engage ALDOT on these issues, and have allowed more than enough time for the agency to comply with the law. Since it has become apparent that ALDOT is not willing to do that, the Southern Environmental Law Center and Black Warrior Riverkeeper have been forced to file a lawsuit under the National Environmental Policy Act.

Our goal is to make sure ALDOT does its job and examines all of the impacts of the project as a whole, while giving the public the chance to help make the best decisions for Birmingham's transportation future. We want to resolve this case as expeditiously as we can and fulfill that goal as soon as possible.



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