

State to spend \$4M on interchange redesign

Norwalk Hour, 9/28/2016

By Robert Koch

NORWALK — The State Bond Commission is expected to approve Friday \$4 million to redesign the Route 7/Merritt Parkway interchange in Norwalk, said state Senate Majority Leader Bob Duff.

In a press statement Tuesday, Duff said the interchange overhaul, which has been on the Connecticut Department of Transportation's drawing board for years, will build the final connections to and from the Route 7 connector and enhance the Main Avenue/Merritt Parkway interchange.

"The failure to complete the interchange project represents a broken promise to businesses and area residents," said Duff, D-Norwalk. "Redesigning the interchange is an important step toward finishing this project, alleviating traffic and improving safety. Improving our transportation network is critically important to our economic future and our quality of life. I want to thank the Department of Transportation for their renewed support for completing the interchange project."

The Bond Commission is scheduled to meet Friday.

DOT spokesman Judd Everhart said the \$4 million would be used to complete the design of the new interchange.

The project has been in planning for more than a decade, but halted for lack of funding and other reasons.

In May 2005, the Merritt Parkway Conservancy and other preservationist groups filed a lawsuit against the Federal Highway Administration and the DOT in an effort to get the state to downsize the then-\$98 million project, which the groups considered too large, too costly and destructive to the parkway.

U.S. District Court in New Haven found the Federal Highway Administration had not met its legal "obligation to ensure that all possible planning was done to minimize harm prior to approving the interchange project." As a result, the DOT terminated its \$34 million contract for phase one of the project.

By 2010, the long-planned, briefly started and then abruptly halted project was all but dead for lack of funding.

In 2014, the DOT decided to re-initiate the project and started the process of selecting a new environmental planning consultant/engineering firm. The project got a further boost when Gov. Dannel P. Malloy included the project in his 30-year transportation plan, which was released in February 2015.

Duff counts the interchange overhaul as among a number of local projects aimed at reducing traffic congestion. The addition of auxiliary lanes to Interstate 95, between Exits 14 and 15, has given drivers space and time to adjust their speeds outside of the main traffic flow, he said.

Connecticut residents spend more than 40 hours per year — a full work week — in traffic congestion. The state loses billions of dollars in economic productivity per year as a result, Duff said. rkoch@hearstmediact.com