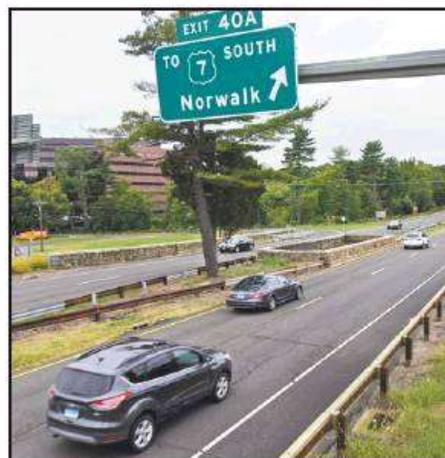


Merritt-Route 7 redesign funded

\$4M for long-delayed overhaul of interchange

By Robert Koch *Norwalk Hour*, 10/2/16

Erik Trautmann / Hearst Connecticut Media The Route 7-Merritt Parkway interchange in Norwalk. State DOT is starting a new planned overhaul.



NORWALK — After years of false starts, the state’s overhaul of the Route 7-Merritt Parkway interchange is moving forward with the approval of \$4 million for design work. The money, released by the State Bond Commission on Friday, will pay for the preliminary design of the overhaul.

“We have retained Stantec, an engineering and design firm, as the prime designer for this project,” said Judd Everhart, spokesman for the state Department of Transportation. “BL Companies will serve as a sub(contractor) to Stantec and do some highway/ bridge design and environmental work.”

Everhart released a timetable for the project, which he described as “very preliminary.” The schedule anticipates local stakeholder meetings in 2016-17, development and evaluation of design alternatives in 2017-18, and construction starting in 2022.

‘Broken promises’

The purpose of the project hasn’t changed: create a full-directional interchange between U.S. Route 7 and Route 15, otherwise known as the Merritt Parkway, while maintaining access at Main Avenue to and from the parkway, according to the DOT.

At present, motorists traveling west on the Merritt Parkway cannot exit to either the north- or southbound Route 7 Connector. Motorists driving either north or south on the connector cannot exit to the eastbound parkway.

State Senate Majority Leader Bob Duff, D-Norwalk, has described the situation as a “broken promise” to residents and businesses, and a frustration and inconvenience for motorists.

He considers the \$4 million for design work and the project’s inclusion in the five-year ramp-up to Gov. Dannel P. Malloy’s 30-year transportation plan as evidence the interchange reconfiguration will become a reality. “I made certain this was in the 30-year transportation plan,” Duff said. “And then because of the fact that we have now diverted some of the sales tax to the transportation fund, it allows this project to move up and get going sooner than it would have been done had we not made that decision.”

Once the project goes into design, Duff said, the DOT will put it on the federal government’s work schedule. The project will be 80 percent funded by the federal government, he added.

False starts

Overhaul of the Route 7/Merritt Parkway/ Main Avenue interchange has been more than a decade in planning and got underway a decade ago, albeit not to everyone’s liking.

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 its original design, which the groups considered too large, too costly and destructive to the parkway.

The following year, 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."

Design work began anew and community consensus was reached in 2009 on design Alternate 21C, which would create the four missing connections and improve the existing connections while minimizing the impact on wetlands and existing bridges. Further, the design would not employ high-flying ramps, according to the DOT. "Starting the project anew, certainly 21C will be on the table, but we have to do an alternatives analysis under NEPA, so it's possible another alternative would rise to the top," Everhart said Wednesday.

Community input

In order to move forward with the new project, the DOT will have to meet the requirements of the Environmental Policy Act and obtain various regulatory approvals. Community outreach also will be part of the process as design work advances.

Jill Smyth, executive director of the Merritt Parkway Conservancy, said the DOT reached out to her organization in July. She described the meeting as a preliminary meet-and-greet with Stantec representatives also at the table. The conservancy's priorities remain unchanged, she indicated.

"We certainly want something that's scaled down and keeping within the character of the parkway, and most importantly, to keep those communication lines open so we can see the development of the design," Smith said. "It's communication and keeping in mind it needs to be within the character of the parkway and have the least amount of impact."

U.S. State Rep. Gail Lavielle, R-Wilton, said Wilton, Redding and Ridgefield residents remain nervous that the interchange overhaul will become "some kind of prelude" to the creation of Super 7 — the never-realized expressway between Norwalk and Danbury. "There is no stated connection and, provided that the interchange is completed as an isolated project, it should be fine," Lavielle said. "It is really too early in the whole transportation program to get either worried or excited about any project."

She described the current interchange configuration as an inconvenience for motorists and lent her support to the overhaul, provided the forthcoming design incorporates community input and addresses local concerns.

Finding money to see the project to completion will be the biggest hurdle, according to Lavielle. She said money has been allocated for other transportation projects only to be removed.

"I'm very concerned about transportation funding in general," Lavielle said. "They can't keep what they've assigned in the transportation budget."