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Tega Cay connector could ease 'worst' intersection, but some question price tag

BY JIE JENNY ZOU

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TEGA CAY — Drivers traveling along Gold Hill Road on their way to S.C. 160 near Tega Cay could have an alternate route in three years that would cut down on time spent in bumper-to-bumper traffic.

But the \$7.4 million price tag and questions about the route have some wondering if the half-mile connector is worth the cost.

If all goes as planned, a new road that connects Gold Hill Road to S.C. 160 would open sometime in spring 2016.

With a distance of a little more than half a mile, the total cost of the project – from initial design to final construction – is estimated at \$7.4 million – making it one of the costlier road projects per mile York County has built.

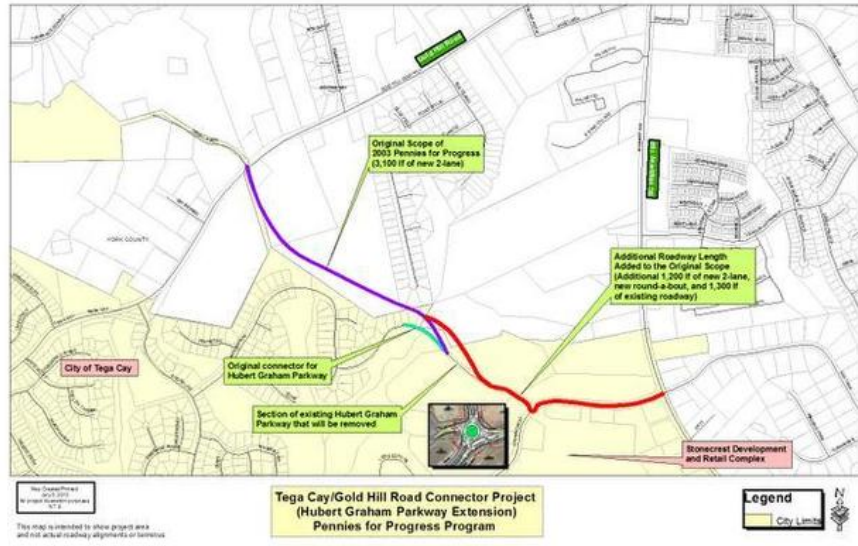
The project – an extension of the existing Hubert Graham Parkway – was approved by voters in the second round of Pennies for Progress, the county's road-building program that is paid for by a penny on the sales tax.

What is known as the Tega Cay/Gold Hill Connector is in final design stages, with land acquisition to begin this spring.

When the project was first budgeted in late 2003, a consulting firm the county hired estimated the cost at \$1.4 million.

By 2009, the county was no longer working with the consultant and had the project re-evaluated – with a budget of \$3.4 million.

Pennies program manager Phil Leazer attributed the cost increase to unanticipated growth, which



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forced engineers to revisit their plan and add more roadway than planned.

“Before you know it, you’ve inflated that project scope so much, it’s affected the cost,” he said.

Then in August, the York County Council voted to spend \$4 million more on the project, bringing the total cost to \$7.4 million.

Council member Michael Johnson, who lives in Tega Cay, stressed the need for the road. He voted for the additional money with the caveat that costs would not go up again.

Because traffic studies are not conducted before Pennies projects are budgeted, Leazer said, the county had no way of knowing that the plan to extend Hubert Graham Parkway, an existing two-lane road, from a cul-de-sac to Gold Hill Road would not handle current traffic.

Under the new design, engineers will remove and rebuild 1,200 feet of the existing Hubert Graham Parkway. Other additions to the project include a roundabout intersection, designed to keep traffic at the posted 35 mph speed limit.

More than \$1.5 million of the total cost has gone to design alone, Leazer said. That includes environmental assessments and permits. The county hired Campco Engineering to design the project. Right-of-way acquisition costs run to just more than \$1 million.

The bulk of the total cost, about \$4.7 million, will pay for construction and inspections. Engineers also have set aside about \$215,000 as a funding cushion.

Cost, location questioned

Building the road, Leazer said, will divert traffic off Gold Hill Road, giving commuters a more direct route to S.C. 160, which connects to Interstate 77.

Tega Cay Mayor George Sheppard said rush-hour congestion at the intersection of Gold Hill Road and S.C. 160 demands an alternative.

“It’s probably the worst in the county,” said Sheppard, who noted the road will provide police, fire, EMS and shoppers with a direct path to a nearby Walmart and other stores and several neighborhoods.

The road will cut through property Beverly Keller has owned since 2001, coming close to her ranch-style home.

Keller, an accounting executive, said she doubts she will use the new road much because she rarely travels in that direction.

“I’ll be ready to be the toll-taker,” she joked. “I’ll never be able to sell that house.”

Keller is one of several residents of Palmetto Plantation – a neighborhood of about 125 homes just outside Tega Cay – who don’t want the road, which will cut through undeveloped property and two private parcels, including hers.

Neighbor Thomas Harris calls the connector “the road to Walmart” on Stonecrest Boulevard, which also leads to the communities of Serenity Point and Lake Ridge.

Harris, a former engineer, questioned the project’s cost and whether it is really needed, since other traffic improvement projects are planned in the area.

Planned updates to the intersection of Gold Hill Road and S.C. 160 will give drivers more opportunities to turn, alleviating congestion and reducing idle time, according to the state Department of Transportation, which is managing the project.

The county also plans to widen the northern section of S.C. 160 to five lanes all the way to the state line.

Harris said the county should wait until those improvements are in place to decide whether to build the connector.

Former Tega Cay Mayor Bob Runde said there’s no doubt the road is needed, but he understands Harris’ concerns. Runde said the new road will provide a second exit for Tega City, which only has one road leading out of the area.

During his tenure as mayor, Runde fought to get the road built as a long-needed city project. It became a county project when costs neared \$1 million.

“The \$7.4 million is hard for me to fathom,” Runde said. “It’s ridiculously high.”

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Leazer said it's difficult to compare different roads, as aspects such as right of way and terrain conditions can affect costs greatly.

"These projects are born, presented and adopted in a one-year-period," Leazer said of the Pennies program. "It's not feasible to assess every single project to the Nth degree."

The county has taken the most "prudent" option by choosing to "thread the needle," he said – building the road on a path that doesn't require taking anyone's home. Other routes the county had considered fell closer to the Palmetto Plantation neighborhood, he said.

"They won't see this traffic," Leazer said, and engineers have designed the road to lie as low as possible, allowing the land to act as a natural buffer for traffic noise.

For Keller, though, the road is still too close for comfort.

"It's for the benefit of Tega Cay, and we're not Tega Cay," she said. "Why wasn't the road put on Tega Cay property?"

Leazer said the connector, along with other traffic improvements in the area, will benefit all nearby residents, not just those who live in Tega Cay.

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