

KnoxNews

To print this page, select **File** then **Print** from your browser

URL:

http://www.knoxnews.com/kns/todays_editorial/article/0,1406,KNS_362_3860483,00.html

Are we ready for another interstate?

June 17, 2005

Knoxville is about to endure many months of construction on Interstate 40 through downtown, along with the major frustrations and disruption of traffic patterns that will accompany it. Now comes news of the possibility of another interstate highway hitting Knoxville and connecting with the Georgia coast.

Interstate 3 is more than a lofty concept. It is heavily on the minds of a number of Georgia lawmakers who are asking for a feasibility study of two routes: I-3 from Knoxville to Savannah, Ga., and I-14 from Augusta, Ga., west through Alabama to Natchez, Miss., on the Mississippi River.

A bill to create I-3 was proposed in July 2004 by Georgia Rep. Max Burns. The designation of I-3 is to honor the 3rd Infantry Division based at Fort Stewart, Ga., for its role in Operation Iraqi Freedom. The proposal also has earned the backing of Georgia's two Republican senators, Saxby Chambliss and Johnny Isakson.

The rationale for the interstate - other than making use of the large amount of public money that usually is available in federal highway bills - is to balance the interstate network in the South with other sections of the nation. When the interstate highway system was begun in the 1950s, the South's population was smaller, and the interstates through the South were fewer than those in the Northeast and along the West Coast.

The population shift to the Sunbelt in recent years has reversed that pattern in some measure, and leaders in southern states want to take advantage of that trend. "Our population is just going crazy," said Rep. Charlie Norwood, whose congressional district includes northeast Georgia, through which I-3 will pass on its way to Knoxville.

I-3 would hug the Savannah River separating Georgia and South Carolina and travel north to Augusta, where it would intersect the already well-traveled I-20 and the proposed I-14. Then, I-3 would continue through northeast Georgia and into North Carolina, where it would follow U.S. 19, 74 and 129 to the Tennessee border.

Presumably, the route would tunnel and snake - or dragon-tail, if it follows U.S. 129 - its way through the mountains. Then, it would hook up with U.S. 129 through Maryville before joining I-140 and connecting with I-40/75 in West Knoxville.

There are advantages to this route for Knoxvilleans, not the least of which is being able to completely bypass Atlanta to get to the Georgia coast or to Florida. Even now, many in this area find it more convenient to travel to Florida via I-40 east and then drive I-26 through the Carolinas to I-95.

The new interstate can help relieve traffic on the oftentimes overcrowded I-75 and I-26, although actual construction appears years, if not decades, away. How much relief it can provide to the established routes by then is questionable.

On the other side, does Knoxville really need another interstate with its heavy traffic and the potential to add air pollution to an area already on the Environmental Protection Agency's nonattainment list? Is there any consideration here for the alternative of mass public transit?

The answer to the first question is a reluctant yes, the second a disappointing no. If a new interstate heading in this direction is to be built, local leaders are not likely to turn

down the opportunity to improve the commerce that such projects bring to the area - jobs, businesses and industries and people.

On the other hand, the environmental concerns are massive. The Knoxville area is too high on too many poor air-quality lists for any local or state leader to take those concerns lightly: more vehicles, more fossil fuels burned, more air pollution.

Then, there is the problem of cutting through the mountains, despoiling the landscape, scattering animal habitats and forever altering the scenery. The environmental impact statement on the North Carolina and Tennessee portions alone will take years to digest and debate.

Thus far, the impetus for this project is coming from Georgia lawmakers. Knoxville and East Tennessee officials might want to take note and exert some control over what is likely to be a drawn-out process but one that could have a heavy impact on this area.

They need to raise their questions and voice their concerns and learn as much as they can as early as they can. Anything less could leave this area shortchanged, economically and environmentally.

Copyright 2005, KnoxNews. All Rights Reserved.