

Is Lafayette ready for a traffic loop?



Jessica Goff, jgoff@theadvertiser.com 8:55 a.m. CDT October 9, 2015



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(Photo: Leslie Westbrook, The Advertiser)

The push to transform [U.S. 90 into a 160-mile interstate \(/story/news/local/2015/10/06/overpass-through-downtown-call--49-south-connector/73448276/\)](#) is well underway. The discussion now shifts toward the next major transportation infrastructure project that will impact day-to-day transit for thousands of residents and businesses in Acadiana.

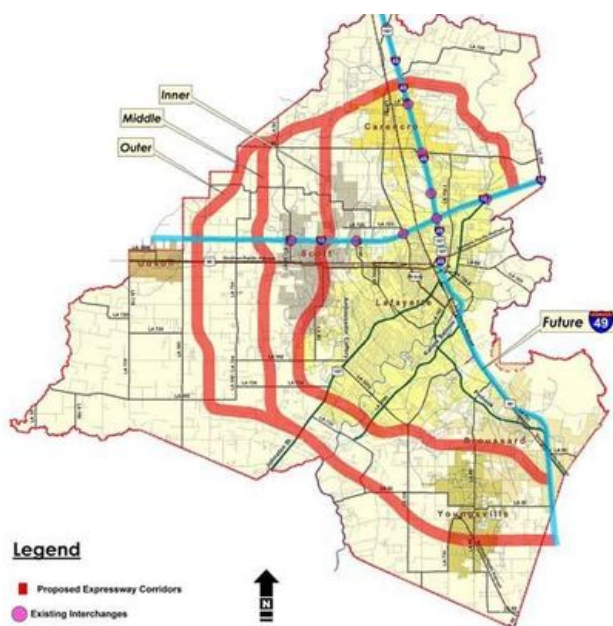
Call it “the loop.”

Dialogue surrounding the Lafayette Regional Expressway, also known as the “Lafayette loop” actually started more than a decade ago. The state created a special commission and conducted a feasibility study, but plans stalled because funding dried up.

But recently, discussion over the expressway and loop alternatives such as “smart loops” have begun again as advocates for the Interstate 49-South Corridor work to move the project forward.

“In terms of construction and design, we need to finish the job,” regional chamber One Acadiana’s President Jason El Koubi said Thursday. “At the same time, we need to begin planning the next big regional transportation infrastructure project. That goes to the topic of the expressway or the loop.”

Several major cities such as Charlotte, North Carolina, Cleveland and Denver have built traffic loops that circumvent urban areas to reduce traffic congestion.



The Lafayette Metropolitan Expressway 2005 feasibility study’s rendering of a proposed expressway. (Photo: Lafayette Metropolitan Expressway)

The Hub City, like many growing, mid-size cities, is enmeshed in a traffic crisis.

The Associated Press recently reported eight out of 10 Americans live on congested corridors, and that number is expected to rise by the millions.

According to the Lafayette Metropolitan Planning Organization, Lafayette has 8.3 crashes per million vehicle miles, nearly five times the state average.

For a five-lane roadway, Louisiana averages about 1.74 crashes per 1 million vehicle miles.

Lafayette Parish has the most crash fatalities on state highways so far this year, according to data provided by LSU’s Highway Safety Research Group.

Aside from safety, building an expressway would divert some traffic from major arterial roads throughout Lafayette’s metro area and make transit faster

for drivers who commute to other Acadiana parishes each day, its advocates say.



The Lafayette Metropolitan Expressway 2005 feasibility study's rendering of a proposed expressway. (Photo: Lafayette Metropolitan Expressway)


The proposed Lafayette Regional Expressway's most extensive intersections would be at I-49 and I-10, U.S. 167 and Johnston Street and U.S. 90. Advocates for the loop say it would alleviate heavy traffic through the city. The roadway would be would four lanes, and could have stretches of up to six lanes.

The expressway's price tag? About \$760 million, according Lafayette Metropolitan Expressway Commission, which was created by state lawmakers in 2003.

But a similar model could be built at a much lower cost by using infrastructure that has been in Acadiana's road system for decades, according to Bill Fontenot, St. Landry Parish president and former Acadiana manager with the Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development.

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Fontenot calls these potential routes that could connect to I-10 and I-49 "smart loops."

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"What we are pushing for are the major routes that already exist," Fontenot said. "We are talking about La. 31 toward St. Martinville, La. 13 in Rapides Parish. U.S. 14. U.S. 190, U.S. 71, U.S. 17. These are roads that already carry a lot of commerce. These roads already connect our communities."

Roads closer to Lafayette's core are significantly utilized by a majority of the region's workforce, he added.

"Many of us in the region go to and from Lafayette and New Iberia to work," Fontenot said.

Many of these roads would need to be widened and re-aligned, he said, but the improvements would cost significantly less than building a new expressway.

In 2004, the expressway commission designed and proposed a toll road that could connect I-49 North, I-10 West in the Scott and Duson area and U.S. 90.

Two years ago, the state granted \$1 million to the commission to conduct required preliminary studies including an environmental impact study, the commission's chairwoman Elaine Abell said.

But funds to build the project just aren't there.



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With I-49 South gaining momentum, the commission decided to hold off on further planning an expressway, Abell said.

"We backed off for a couple of years. The I-49 project is moving forward at a better pace now," she said. "It looks like they are going to get a lot more done if they get funding to connect a portion. So we now are picking up the pace."

Other local transportation and infrastructure advocates such as I-49 South Coalition Charmin David Mann said plans for an expressway may be too far into Acadiana's future.

But improving major arterial roads that connect to interstates 40 and 10 could help increase regional support for such a larger project, Fontenot said.

"Those roads need to be improved, because the state has really not invested in keeping those roadways up to par," he said. "There are enough corridors that are there. Every parish has a major route that would take you to I-49 or I-10."

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Highway workers continue road construction on U.S. Highway 90 in Broussard, LA, along the planned Interstate 49 corridor, Monday, Oct. 28, 2013. Paul Kieu, The Daily Advertiser (Photo: Paul Kieu, The Daily Advertiser)

About the Lafayette Regional Expressway:

The a toll road would connect Interstate 49 North, Interstate 10 West in the Scott and Duson area and U.S. 90.

The extensive interchanges would be at I-49 and I-10, U.S. 167 and Johnston Street and U.S. 90.

The estimated cost for this beltway, or loop, was \$760 million.

Expressway Timeline:

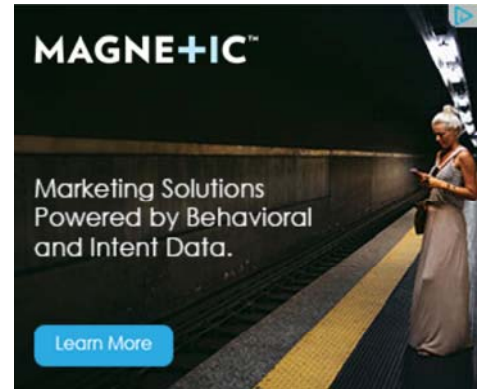
2003 - The Lafayette Metropolitan Expressway Commission was created by the Legislature to look at nontraditional funding sources to build a limited access roadway, or loop, around Lafayette.

2006 -The Transportation Mobility Fund was created by the legislature as a way to leverage state funding to build mega projects, like loops. No money into the mobility fund.

2007 - Senate Finance Committee voted against pulling \$429 million a year from the state's general fund to fund "mega-projects."

2013 - Lafayette Metropolitan Expressway Commission was awarded a \$1 million grant toward required preliminary studies including the project's environmental impact.

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