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Study: Currituck span would be worth toll on travelers

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Crossing a mid-Currituck County bridge would cost travelers \$8 at first, with the one-way toll eventually rising to \$12, to finance costs that could push \$800 million, a new study says.

The dividend, however, would be shaving as much as an hour off a trip to the northern Outer Banks and avoiding miles-long backups that are the norm on summer weekends at the Wright Memorial Bridge, according to the study and transportation officials.

The study estimates the 7-mile bridge would draw an average of 13,500 vehicles daily on peak-season weekends, with revenues of \$7 million in its first year. It could open in 2013.

Tolls would be \$8 one way in peak season and \$6 in the off season. By 2025, traffic counts are expected to increase to average 19,200 daily on summer weekends, with tolls at \$12 and annual revenue of \$24.9 million.

By comparison, the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel toll is \$12 and the Golden Gate Bridge toll is \$5, according to a chart in the study. Some charge one toll for crossing both ways.

Officials believe motorists would use the toll bridge because it would save 35 miles and about an hour of travel time on a trip from the Currituck mainland to Corolla.

However, critics say the bridge would eventually cause its own problems by accelerating growth on the northern Outer Banks and generating even more traffic.

The bridge is one of the longest-running and most debated highway projects in state history. Dozens of state and federal agencies and elected officials have wrestled over the viability of the project since at least the 1970s. An early projected cost estimate was \$39 million, with a projection in 1998 putting it at \$87 million. Escalating costs and environmental concerns have delayed the project.

Wilbur Smith Associates, based in Connecticut, conducted the study for the North Carolina Turnpike Authority last year and, after compiling data, sent it to the state last week. The state posted the study on the Web late Tuesday.

On peak-season weekends, 78 percent of the motorists on N.C. 12 near Chicahawk Trail in Southern Shores were tourists, according to traffic surveys conducted by Wilbur Smith. On off-season weekends, 60 percent of the motorists were tourists. On weekdays in the off season, 68 percent were residents.

Travelers now must use N.C. 12 after crossing the Wright Memorial Bridge to get to the northern Outer Banks.

The latest cost estimates on the bridge have increased to \$296 million to \$795 million depending on bridge design, according to the Turnpike Authority's Web site.

The project got new life when it was assigned to the Turnpike Authority nearly two years ago, allowing for private construction and tolls to repay the costs.

In what the Turnpike Authority calls a public-private partnership, the bridge would be built, maintained and operated by a private investor, said David W. Joyner, executive director.

"There is money out there," Joyner said.

The bridge is on schedule to open in 2013, he said.

The authority and the investor would negotiate a contract after more economic, engineering and environmental studies, he said. Negotiations would determine details such as the width, toll rates, how long tolls would be collected and rate packages for regular commuters, Joyner said. The contract could run 50 to 75 years.

The study is preliminary and does not support project financing, according to a letter to Joyner included in the study. Bridge maintenance was not accounted for in revenue projections.

Wilbur Smith called the bridge project critical for the tourist industry and for storm evacuation.

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