

Money to move

Triangle leaders have the challenge of paying for badly needed transportation improvements during a time of tight budgets.

Streets and highways in the Triangle are jammed with cars and trucks and more are arriving every day. Air pollution, much of it ozone generated from the exhaust of those gridlocked vehicles, is so bad on some summer days that the Environmental Protection Agency has imposed new air quality standards and is threatening to withhold federal highway funds unless improvements are made.

Commercial and residential sprawl continues to ooze outward while the lack of close-in affordable housing causes lower-paid workers to commute further and further to jobs and homes.

And if that weren't enough, the Triangle faces a projected shortfall of \$8 billion to \$10 billion in federal and state funds to meet basic transportation needs over the next 20 years.

That is the grim forecast and serious challenge facing Triangle leaders. That the area needs a predictable and increased flow of transportation money is obvious. What is not so clear is where it will come from.

James O. Roberson, president of the Research Triangle Foundation, framed the issue at a meeting of area business and civic leaders last week: "The way government works is just not adequate to keep up with the growth of the area, and we desperately need the ability to pay for some of these projects ourselves."

With budget cuts all the rage in Washington and Raleigh, local governments are likely to keep looking for innovative, effective transportation funding sources. It's important that those sources also be fair to taxpayers.

Mayor Charles Meeker of Raleigh favors asking the state for legislation allowing Wake County to put a 5 percent sales tax on gasoline and a \$20 increase on local vehicle registrations to pay for local improvements. While that idea has some logic and merit, primarily because it puts the burden of transportation improvements on those who contribute to the congestion on local highways, it is a clearly regressive tax scheme that weighs heaviest on the poor. The working stiff in an old clunker would pay the same tax as a rich executive in a luxury car. A slight increase in property taxes would more progressively and fairly spread the cost.

Solving the region's complex and long-term transportation needs may take more vision than dollars. There are only so many lanes that can be added to so many roads before the health and the quality of life hereabouts decline even further.

Mass transit, as expensive as it is, holds the greatest promise as a way to move Triangle residents to work, shopping and recreation with maximum efficiency and minimal impact on the environment. Smart land-use planning, along with sensible highway location and design supplemented by adequate mass transit connections, can reduce the miles and minutes endured by commuters each day.

It is not a matter of "build it and they will come." They are already here and more are on the way. Finding smart ways to enhance the region's transportation network will be an expensive, challenging task, but the benefits to taxpayers will far outweigh the cost.

19 APRIL 6 of N+O