

Scaled down Rt. 31 bypass the future of Jersey roads

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NEW BRUNSWICK -- Transportation Commissioner John "Jack" Lettiere, speaking at a Rutgers University seminar Monday, said that he wants to put the expanding state highway network on a diet. He used the latest plans for the proposed South Branch Parkway in Flemington and Raritan Township, which replaced designs for a more expensive four-lane Route 31 bypass in Hunterdon County, as an example of what the Department of Transportation wants to do elsewhere in the state.

The concept he detailed, called Smart Transportation, relies on building a network of connecting roads in a grid pattern and developing land around the grid instead of the more conventional approach of widening highways and permitting strip mall development on both sides.

Lettiere, addressing the Voorhees Transportation Institute, said that if the proposed four-lane Route 31 bypass were built, "we'd literally have \$150,000 to \$175,000 of cost, and in five years, we'd be in a worse (traffic) predicament than when we started."

By comparison, the two-lane parkway will cost about one-third less and will provide more capacity to move traffic by using connecting roads, he said.

DOT scuttled the Route 31 bypass project earlier this year and hired consultants, who met with officials, business people and residents during the summer before returning in the fall with concepts for the parkway. Those consultants will continue to hold workshops in Flemington and Raritan Townships to talk about how to use vacant land surrounding the parkway.

"A bypass would have run through and ruined the town," Lettiere said. "The town (officials) and town people understand how it (a parkway) will maintain the character of the community."

The DOT is trying to get away from the old way of widening roads inviting development that brought highway congestion and prompting residents to ask for more road widening.

The DOT has 13 smart transportation projects being studied or designed throughout the state. Articles about the Route 31 project attracted the interest of Pennsylvania transportation officials, who considered a Route 202 bypass and met with New Jersey officials, Lettiere said.

Now, New Jersey officials will explain the concept to officials from nine other northeastern states at an upcoming conference, Lettiere said.

The smart transportation concept isn't a cure all, Lettiere cautioned, but is a tool towns can use when they decide how land should be used.

"We're asking them not just to consider water and sewer, but also transportation as a vital utility," he said.

Somerset County Freeholder Peter Palmer said that, ultimately, the idea makes sense. However, he questioned whether it could work in existing suburban neighborhoods.

Lettiere said that one answer to Palmer's question might be to link dead-end cul-de-sacs to form the connecting streets sometimes shown in plans but never built.

For that solution to work, Palmer said, connecting streets shown on plans would have to be built rather than deferred to avoid creating more cul-de-sacs.

"If they plan it as having through-connecting streets, they have to build them up front and not just have them on paper," Palmer said.

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