



City, county leaders want fed help to build bridge over I-85

By Michael Barrett

Gazette staff

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A bid for a gigantic grant to help build a new bridge over Interstate 85 near Gastonia's busiest shopping center has failed to win federal favor for the last two years.

Undeterred, Gaston County leaders are throwing their hat into the ring again this summer.

"We just were not awarded the grant in previous grant cycles, so we're going after it again," said Randi Gates, chief transportation planner for the city of Gastonia. "It is very common with this grant program for applications to have to be submitted a number of times before they're funded."

The 'Lineberger Connector' bridge over I-85 would allow people to drive to and from the Franklin Square shopping center and 450 acres of land that is currently wooded and undeveloped. It would involve an extension of Lineberger Road, which is currently just a short access route to the shopping center that runs behind Kohl's. The road was developed years ago with the potential of one day being extended into an interstate overpass.

A master plan that was crafted last year offers a glimpse at how Gastonia leaders expect those valuable 450 acres, long owned by the Lineberger family, to be developed in the coming years. It shows how blocks of the real estate could be reshaped to accommodate multiple hotels and a convention center, a light industrial tenant, office buildings, single-family homes and apartments, and other mixed uses including retail shops and even a new community public park.

That new growth would be accessed not only by the new bridge, but also through an extension of Aberdeen Boulevard from the west, along with the build-out of an entirely new network of roads connecting with N.C. 7/Lowell Road to the north and Main Street in Lowell to the east.

\$25 million pursuit

The completion of the master plan in 2018 came as part of an effort to pursue up to \$25 million in federal funding that would be used to build the new bridge. Gastonia City Council members this month issued a resolution of support for the application that will be submitted in July in pursuit of that hefty grant.

The money would come from the U.S. Department of Transportation's BUILD program, which stands for Better Utilizing Investments to Leverage Development. Funds for the 2019 grant program will be awarded on a competitive basis for nationwide projects that have a significant local or regional impact. Local leaders from Gastonia, Lowell and Gaston County have all endorsed the Lineberger Connector as a worthy candidate for the money.

"It is a highly competitive grant program," Gates said.

But there's a lot of money up for grabs. In the 2019 grant cycle, a total of \$900 million is slated to be awarded to projects across the nation. There's a \$25 million maximum that can be provided for each project, and the 'winners' will be announced in mid-November.

Local officials believe the new bridge would be one of many upgrades that could provide some relief to traffic congestion in the Franklin Square area. The overall effort to develop the Lineberger land could cost an estimated \$57 million, and would be dependent upon what private entities ultimately become involved with the venture. But people such as Gastonia Mayor Walker Reid is among those who see the federal grant as a necessity.

"(It) would make a huge economic impact, not only on Gastonia and Lowell, but also on the county and region," he said recently of the bridge project and land development.

You can reach Michael Barrett at 704-869-1826 or on Twitter [@GazetteMike](https://twitter.com/GazetteMike).