Survey: Region needs bypass

Most say they would consider less costly, effective alternatives

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Nearly seven in 10 local residents say a need exists for a bypass of U.S. 29 around Charlottesville, according to a new survey. But almost as many said they would be in favor of exploring alternatives to the approved Western Bypass if they cost less and were effective in relieving congestion.

The survey, commissioned in part by Charlottesville Tomorrow, was undertaken by the University of Virginia’s Center for Survey Research, which co-sponsored a question on the need for a bypass.

“We have not really heard from the wider citizenry about this issue,” said Thomas M. Guterbock, the center’s director. “People on both sides have been very vocal, but it has not been clear whether this is something people want or they don’t.”
Bypass

Western Bypass survey

Is a U.S. 29 Bypass around Charlottesville needed?
- 69.3% Yes, needed
- 19.5% No, not needed

Is traffic congestion on U.S. 29 going through the Charlottesville area a problem?
- 54.7% Major problem
- 28.5% Minor problem
- 11.7% Not much of a problem
- 5.1% Not a problem

Should officials look at alternatives to the approved Western Bypass?
- 30.2% Strongly favor
- 36.7% Somewhat favor
- 15.9% Somewhat oppose
- 17.1% Strongly oppose

The telephone survey was conducted in January with 1,098 individuals randomly selected by the Center for Survey Research at the University of Virginia. The sampling's margin of error is +/-3.75 percentage points.

When asked if a bypass around Charlottesville is needed, 69.3 percent of respondents answered yes and 19.5 percent answered no. Some respondents said they didn't know (10.3 percent) or refused to answer (0.4 percent).

Greene County residents were more likely to favor a bypass than those in Charlottesville or Albemarle County.

"I am not surprised, and we have heard that in the public hearings where even people who were opposed to the Western Bypass said we needed something," said Jeff Werner, with the Piedmont Environmental Council, a bypass opponent. "That's sort of an initial response that you expect a lot of people to make."

Supporters of the approved Western Bypass also said responses to this question mirrored past surveys.

Neil Williamson is president of the Free Enterprise Forum, a group that conducted a survey in 2004 that found 67 percent of people in the region favored a bypass.

"This is greater than the results of our survey, and traffic volumes have not decreased since 2004," Williamson said. "Considering the level of attention the bypass has received over the past 12 months, an almost 70-percent approval rating for that road is significant."

In January, 1,098 area residents were surveyed by telephone on a number of local issues, including three specific questions about transportation and the bypass. Participants included residents of six area localities in the Thomas Jefferson Planning District: the city of Charlottesville and the counties of Albemarle, Fluvanna, Greene, Louisa and Nelson. The results have an accuracy of plus or minus 3.75 percentage points.

A second question asked participants to describe the magnitude of the traffic congestion problem on U.S. 29, and 54.7 percent of respondents said it was a major problem, compared with 28.5 percent who thought congestion was a minor problem. Another 16.8 percent said it was not much of a problem or no problem at all.

"It's amazing to me that anyone could think there is not congestion on U.S. 29," said Timothy Hulbert, president of the Charlottesville Regional Chamber of Commerce. "Eighty-three percent said they saw congestion. It's surprising it's that low."

Werner focused his attention on the 54.7 percent who feel congestion is a major problem.

"This really flies in the face of all the alarm we've heard," Werner said. "This contradicts that argument that people hate it so much they avoid it, that traffic is so bad people are not shopping on U.S. 29."

In a third question, respondents were asked about whether elected officials should consider alternatives to the already approved Western Bypass, particularly if other options were more effective and less costly. The survey found 69.9 percent of respondents strongly favor or somewhat favor consideration of alternatives.

"I think the results are pretty consistent with what we already know," said Morgan Butler, an attorney with the Southern Environmental Law Center, which opposes the bypass. "There's a huge amount of concern with the Western Bypass proposal and an overwhelming desire to consider better alternatives."

"The idea that people would favor looking at something that they have been told will be less costly and equally effective is not surprising," Williamson said. "Whether or not that is actually the case is the question."

Butler said the alternatives previously discussed by Albemarle supervisors include key elements from the Places29 Master Plan, such as extending parallel roads to Berkmar Drive and Hillsdale Drive Extended.

"Plus, converting the most congested intersections to grade-separated interchanges," Butler added. "You would get rid of some of the longest traffic lights and rush-hour tie-ups."

The original Places29 plan included proposed grade-separated interchanges at major intersections such as U.S. 29 and Rio Road.

Hulbert said the business community would not support that approach.

"You could put all the money in the world on the table for grade separations and our chamber would not support them," Hulbert said. "They are incredibly disruptive and they don't provide the relief we are looking for."

Opponents counter that the Western Bypass fails by a similar yardstick.

"Given all the information that we have, congestion on the bypassed section of U.S. 29 is not going to be resolved by this bypass," Werner said. "And nothing will be done to address congestion north of the bypass."

The Commonwealth Transportation Board allocated $197 million in additional funds to the project last July. The Virginia Department of Transportation has selected nine firms to develop design-build proposals for the 6.2-mile, limited-access bypass in advance of an April bidding deadline.

The questions on local transportation were part of which is being called the Jefferson Area Community Survey, which is planned to be a bi-annual omnibus survey of public opinion.

"The survey is designed in general to serve the increasing need for scientifically based survey information about the greater Charlottesville region," Guterbock said.

Six nonprofit organizations and government agencies participated in the inaugural survey. Guterbock said he hopes to conduct the next survey in September.

Charlottesville Tomorrow is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization covering land-use and transportation issues in Charlottesville and Albemarle County.