



## The Birmingham News

### Effort revives interest in burying I-20/59

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A proposal to divert a stretch of Interstate 20/59 in downtown Birmingham below ground has been talked about for years. On Friday, the idea of creating an underground channel for the highway was given new life.

The Birmingham-Jefferson Convention Complex's board voted Friday to contribute \$35,000 toward a \$100,000 feasibility study examining the plan proposed by Operation New Birmingham. It is the latest effort in a proposal first outlined 16 years ago to better connect the BJCC to the rest of downtown.

Chris Hatcher, ONB's director of planning, said he hopes the study will jumpstart the plan, which was resurrected in 2004 when Pittsburgh-based Urban Design Associates produced drawings updating ONB's City Center Master Plan. No feasibility study has ever been performed on the idea.

Over the next three to four weeks, ONB plans to seek additional funding for the study from the Birmingham Museum of Art, the Alabama School of Fine Arts and others.

Hatcher said ONB also plans to seek a \$50,000 grant from the Community Foundation of Greater Birmingham. The foundation hadn't received an official proposal as of Friday, and its current grant request cycle ends March 15, spokeswoman Emily Rushing said. "We are aware of their plans," she said.

With downtown Birmingham experiencing a revitalization through construction of hotels, condos and a proposed \$40 million entertainment district next to the BJCC, Hatcher said the timing is right to explore the idea of an underground channel.

"The fact that the existing elevated highway is deteriorating and in the last third of its life makes it important for us to address this issue," Hatcher said. "The Alabama highway department is already looking at whether to rebuild the highway. This study will allow us to present an alternative."

BJCC Executive Director Jack Fields said lowering the interstate would improve access to the convention center from downtown and its proposed entertainment district.

The board approved giving the money by a 4-2 vote, with board member Gil Wideman arguing the study is a waste of money since Hatcher concedes there is no guarantee federal highway officials would approve the proposal.

Hatcher acknowledges building an underground channel for the interstate downtown would be more expensive than fixing the elevated highway, but he added the move would have a longer-lasting impact on downtown.

The feasibility study will examine specific costs of the project, which Hatcher estimates would reach several hundred million dollars. The work would take at least a decade to complete, he added.

"We won't even know if this is feasible until we do the study," Hatcher said. "This is a process that could take up to a year to complete. We have to do soil tests, engineering studies, because there are a lot of

utilities underground. We don't even know what's all under there."

A letter from ONB President Michael Calvert presented to the BJCC board said traffic engineers Glatting, Jackson, Kercher & Anglin Inc., who were part of a design team assembled by Urban Design Associates, completed a preliminary analysis and "tentatively concluded that placing the highway in an underground channel is feasible."

ONB's letter said the biggest hurdles include connections to Interstate 65 and the Elton B. Stephens Expressway, providing access to and from those highways to downtown and the BJCC, as well as accommodating traffic during construction.

With the Alabama Department of Transportation planning to reconstruct the highway due to its age, Hatcher hopes the study persuades the state and federal officials to consider the benefits of replacing the interstate with an underground channel.

"It's a win-win for the city and state," Hatcher said. "Seattle, Boston and Cincinnati are all cities that have done this to replace elevated highways downtown. They have turned depressed areas near interstates into a positive."

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