

## Planned project will wi



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Posted Jun 24, 2017 at 6:00 AM

Updated Jun 24, 2017 at 10:21 PM

The Alabama Department of Transportation is conducting land survey of the McFarland Boulevard interchange in preparation for a project to add lanes and a new bridge. arland  
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The bridge project is part of a larger plan to widen the McFarland/U.S. 82 corridor between Campus Drive and Alabama Highway 69 in Northport as the need for traffic capacity grows along with the city, which has seen a 10.2-percent increase in population since 2010.

The project, which will add one traffic lane in each direction by building two new spans on either side of the existing bridge, is in the early stages, ALDOT West Central Region Pre-Construction Engineer David Kemp said. The surveys are part of preliminary research for the project, which Kemp said was unlikely to break ground for at least another three to five years.

In addition to the new traffic lanes and the bike and pedestrian pathway, the early planning calls for barge protectors to be added to the piers of the 57-year-old bridge, Kemp said.

The Woolsey Finnell Bridge is one of four spans across the Black Warrior River in the Tuscaloosa area. The widening would add capacity in the short term following the indefinite postponement of longer-term plans to reduce congestion along the McFarland corridor with an eastern bypass connecting U.S. Interstate 20/59 near Cottdale to U.S. Highway 82 near Northport via the Paul W. Bryant Bridge, which opened in 2004.

Traffic counts from 2015, the most recent available, showed 52,110 motorists on average traveled the Woolsey Finnell Bridge daily, said John D. McWilliams, public information officer for ALDOT's West Central office. In 2010, the daily average was about 47,990. Tuscaloosa's population has increased from 90,353 in 2010 to around 99,543, according to census data released by the city last month.

"The city continuously keeps growing and growing," McWilliams said. "You try to keep up with the growth that is going on."

The pedestrian pathway will help unite the northern and southern riverfronts in the city, part of the city's master plan for the Riverwalk.

"ALDOT has been very enthusiastic with the city in that regard," Tuscaloosa Mayor Walt Maddox said. "It's exciting to think about."

The project will be paid for with federal aid funds, ALDOT West Central Region Engineer James Brown said, adding it was too early for a reliable estimate of the project's cost.

As the Woolsey Finnell project moves forward, planning will have to consider graves located in the historic Bryce Hospital cemetery that adjoins the right-of-way on the southern approach to the bridge.

"We needed to be sure that on the right-of-way side of the Bryce cemetery that there wasn't still anything out there that we didn't know about," Kemp said.

The department contracted with the University of Alabama's Office of Archeological Research to survey the property and identify the location of grave sites along the boundary. The UA crew was in the old Bryce Hospital cemetery north of Jack Warner Parkway in recent days mapping potential grave locations along its border with the right-of-way near the interchange. The crew was using ground-penetrating radar to identify potential grave locations.

The Office of Archeological Research conducted a similar survey of the cemetery's unwooded sections when UA purchased the bulk of the historic hospital property in 2010 from the Alabama Department of Mental Health, according to Bryce historian Steve Davis. As part of the purchase agreement, the mental health department retained ownership of the cemeteries. At the time, the survey identified about 1,800 potential grave sites, Davis said.

"We know they go right up to the berm right there on Jack Warner," Davis said. "The only question now is what they find in the woods."

On the wooded hillside bordering the open green space of the cemetery, stone grave markers stick up among the leaf litter and undergrowth.

The cemetery, the oldest of the four on the Mental Health property with graves dating to the 1860s, was disturbed in the 1960s with the construction of Jack Warner Parkway, known at the time as River Road. The remains displaced by that project were moved to other cemeteries on mental health grounds, Davis said. On the south side of Jack Warner is another cemetery with more than 2,000 graves.

"No matter what, there will be graves that have to move if they go with that right of way," Davis said.

It remains unclear at this preliminary stage how the proximity of the cemetery will impact the project.

"In the really early stage, you don't know what you will encounter," Brown said.

ALDOT is still gathering information, and the planning must also account for the interchanges at Jack Warner Parkway and Rice Mine Road.

"All of that has got to be figured," Brown said.

The bridge is named for Woolsey Finnell, a World War I veteran who served as Tuscaloosa County's probate judge, the city of Tuscaloosa's engineer and the state director of highways. Finnell died in 1955 and the bridge was named in his honor when it opened in 1961.

