

Project History

Midtown Tunnel

The Midtown Tunnel connects the Cities of Norfolk and Portsmouth under the main channel of the Southern Branch of the Elizabeth River. This highway link carrying US Highway Route 58 (“Route 58”) under the river first opened to traffic in 1962. A quasi-governmental entity named the Elizabeth River Tunnel District (“ERTD”) developed and constructed the Midtown Tunnel utilizing revenue bond financing.

The ERDT was chartered by the Virginia General Assembly in 1942 for the specific purpose of building tunnel connections between the Cities of Norfolk and Portsmouth in order to replace the ferry service that previously linked the cities. The debt payments incurred by the construction of the tunnel connections were repaid through the collection of tolls levied for traveling through the facilities. The ERTD completed the Downtown Tunnel, connecting the two cities below the Southern Branch of the Elizabeth River, a decade before the Midtown project, opening that facility to traffic in the early 1950s. Tolls were removed from both tunnels in the late 80s after all the original bond debt had been repaid. The toll was 25¢ each way at both tunnels at the time of their removal.

Volumes through the Midtown Tunnel were approximately 8,400 vehicles per day during its first year of operation. However, over the years, daily volumes through the tube have increased to approximately 38,000 vehicles. Consequently, extended hours of congestion and delays in both Norfolk and Portsmouth are a routine, daily occurrence at the facility.

The need for expanded capacity at the Midtown Tunnel location has been well known and documented for decades, but developing a successful funding strategy to expand the tunnel has remained elusive over time. In preparation for an update to the Regional Transportation Plan in 2006, the Hampton Roads Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) undertook a major study, available at <http://www.hrpdc.org/>, detailing the feasibility of utilizing toll financing to support the region’s high priority unfunded transportation projects such as the Midtown Tunnel. This analysis concluded that the development and enhancements of the Midtown Tunnel and MLK Freeway Extension projects could be financially feasible if tolls were also collected to supplement inadequate public funds. This would include tolling the parallel Downtown Tunnel to create a congestion management plan to prevent the diversion of potential Midtown Tunnel traffic to a competing free facility.

The Brambleton Interchange in Norfolk connects primarily with Hampton Boulevard to the north and Brambleton Avenue to the east. The original design from the 1960s for the tunnel and interchange in Norfolk always anticipated that a second tube would be built to the north of the existing tunnel. Accordingly, it is anticipated that a second tunnel in this configuration and arrangement can be accommodated on the Norfolk side of the river with relatively minor engineering adjustments to the present interchange.

Hampton Boulevard is a major arterial highway running primarily in a north/south direction on the western side of the City of Norfolk. The Hampton Boulevard corridor stretches for approximately 6.2 miles from the Midtown Tunnel on the south to the main entrance to Naval Station Norfolk on the north at the intersection of Admiral Taussig Boulevard. Average daily volumes on this four-lane facility currently exceed 41,000 vehicles per day.

Hampton Boulevard is an important travel and transportation corridor serving Norfolk and the Hampton Roads region with several major institutions including the Norfolk Naval Base, Old Dominion University (ODU), Norfolk International Terminals (NIT), and Medical Center Complex including Sentara Norfolk General and Heart Hospitals, Children's Hospital of the Kings Daughters, and Eastern Virginia Medical School (EVMS). Each of these major institutions utilize Hampton Boulevard as a major point for ingress and egress from their facilities.

Brambleton Avenue is a major arterial highway extending from the Midtown Tunnel on the west across the northern area of downtown Norfolk and terminates at I-264. Brambleton Avenue is a six-lane facility from the Brambleton Interchange to Tidewater Drive and then narrows to four lanes between Tidewater Drive and I-264. Current traffic volumes along the route are approximately 44,000 vehicles per day.

MLK Freeway Extension

In the Tidewater area, I-264 and Route 58 link the area's commercial port and distribution facilities to outside markets. These highways serve as part of the regional highway network and, as such, are important commercial and commuter routes. I-264 extends west to the convergence of I-664 and I-64 in the City of Chesapeake. Further to the east, it crosses the Southern Branch of the Elizabeth River before connecting with I-464. It then extends through the City of Norfolk before its terminus at the I-64 interchange.

The MLK Freeway becomes Hampton Boulevard (Virginia Alternate Route 337) and Brambleton Avenue (Route 58) upon entering the City of Norfolk. Hampton Boulevard extends north to the Norfolk Naval Air Station, the Norfolk International Terminals, and the Sewells Point Terminals. These facilities serve as major employment and shipping centers and, therefore, generate considerable traffic.

In the City of Portsmouth, a direct, limited access connection does not currently exist between the MLK Freeway and I-264, forcing drivers, including commercial traffic from the ports, to use winding routes through local city streets and neighborhoods.

The MLK Freeway is a north-south, four-lane facility that provides access to the City of Norfolk via the Midtown Tunnel. I-264, via the Downtown Tunnel, is the only other direct highway link between Portsmouth and Norfolk.

The MLK Freeway Extension and interchange at I-264 has been studied since 1989, and is included in the City of Portsmouth's General Land Use Map and comprehensive plan.

The project is also a component of the 2026 Hampton Roads Planning District Commission (HRPDC) Long Range Transportation Plan and the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) Six Year Improvement Plan. Both the Virginia Chamber of Commerce and the Portsmouth Chamber of Commerce support the proposed improvements.

Downtown Tunnel

The Downtown Tunnel on I-264 crosses the Southern Branch of the Elizabeth River in the South Hampton Roads area. It links the City of Portsmouth with the City of Norfolk. In conjunction with the Berkley Bridge, the Downtown Tunnel connects to Interstate 464 to the City of Chesapeake. The tunnel passes underneath the Southern Branch Lower Reach Channel which has authorized navigation channel dimensions of 450 feet in width and 45 feet in depth.

The initial two-lane Downtown Tunnel was opened in 1952. In March 1987, construction of parallel tube on the Downtown Tunnel was completed and opened to traffic, and then the original Downtown Tunnel was closed for renovation and reopened in 1989, providing a four-lane Interstate highway (I-264). Tolls were removed in the late 80s