The push to transform U.S. 90 into a 160-mile interstate is well underway. The discussion now shifts toward the next major transportation infrastructure project that will affect day-to-day transit for thousands of residents and businesses in Acadiana.

Call it “the loop.”

Dialogue surrounding the Lafayette Regional Expressway, also known as the “Lafayette loop” actually started more than a decade ago. The state created a special commission and conducted a feasibility study, but plans stalled because funding dried up.

But recently, discussion over the expressway and loop alternatives such as “smart loops” have begun again as advocates for the Interstate 49-South Corridor work to move the project forward.

See LOOP, Page 8A
"In terms of construction and design, we need to finish the job," regional chamber One Acadiana's President Jason El Koubi said Thursday. "At the same time, we need to begin planning the next big regional transportation infrastructure project. That goes to the topic of the expressway or the loop." Several major cities such as Charlotte, North Carolina, Cleveland and Denver have built traffic loops that circumvent urban areas to reduce traffic congestion. The Hub City, like many growing, mid-size cities, is ensnared in a traffic crisis. The Associated Press recently reported eight out of 10 Americans live on congested corridors, and that number is expected to rise by the millions.

According to the Lafayette Metropolitan Planning Organization, Lafayette has 8.3 crashes per million vehicle miles, nearly five times the state average. For a five-lane roadway, Louisiana averages about 1.74 crashes per 1 million vehicle miles. Lafayette Parish has the most crash fatalities on state highways so far this year, according to data provided by LSU's Highway Safety Research Group.

Aside from safety, building an expressway would divert some traffic from major arterial roads throughout Lafayette's metro area and make transit faster for drivers who commute to other Acadiana parishes each day, its advocates say. The proposed Lafayette Regional Expressway's most extensive intersections would be at I-49 and I-10, U.S. 167 and Johnston Street and U.S. 90. Advocates for the loop say it would alleviate heavy traffic through the city. The roadway would be four lanes, and could have stretches of up to six lanes. The expressway's price tag? About $760 million, according to Lafayette Metropolitan Expressway Commission, which was created by state lawmakers in 2003.

But a similar model could be built at a much lower cost by using infrastructure that has been in Acadiana's roadway system for decades, according to Bill Fontenot, St. Landry Parish president and former Acadiana manager with the Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development. Fontenot calls these smartloops. "What we are pushing are the major routes that already exist," Fonte- not said. "We are talking about La. 31 toward St. Martinville, La. 13 toward Rapids Parish, U.S. 14, U.S. 190, U.S. 71, U.S. 17. These roads connect to 1-49 to I-10 or 1-10." Private companies could have stretches of I-49 South gaining momentum, the commission decided to hold off on further planning an expressway, Abell said. "We backed off for a couple of years. The I-49 project is moving forward at a better pace now," she said. "It looks like they are going to get a lot more done if they get funding to connect a portion. So now we are picking up the pace."

Other local transportation and infrastructure advocates such as U.S. 79 Coalition Chairman David Mann said plans for an expressway may be too far into Acadiana's future. But improving major arterial roads that connect to interstates 49 and 10 could help increase regional support for such a larger project, Fontenot said. "These roads need to be improved, because the state has really not invest- ed in keeping those roadways up to par," he said. "There are enough corridors that are there. Every parish has a major road that would take you to I-4 or 1-10."