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Parkway plans gaining steam

Final design coming soon _for Knoxville regional route

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After nearly two years of sometimes contentious work, a local resource team is one month away from making a final recommendation for the route of the proposed Knoxville Regional Parkway.

But before the 18-member team submits its final plan to the Tennessee Department of Transportation, the public gets another chance to review the route and suggest additions or changes. Four public workshops are planned to showcase the team's choices and record public comments.

"It's something we've accepted, but I can't say we're happy," said Sharon Todd, who represents the Claxton community on the Knoxville Regional Parkway Design Resource Team.

"I don't know if anybody is happy about it. I am happy to be involved in it. I think I was listened to and I think we gave people a voice," she said.

Todd, who owns property affected by the proposed parkway, is opposed to the project. She said she isn't convinced the parkway will provide congestion relief for downtown Knoxville, which is the purpose of the road.

For decades local officials have been searching for a way to divert traffic from downtown Knoxville. More than 160,000 vehicles a day pass the Papermill Drive interchange on the commingled Interstates 40/75, according to TDOT.

The proposed parkway would link Interstate 75 in Loudon County with I-75 in Anderson County near Wolf Valley Road. If built, the four-lane, median-divided highway will be designated State Route 475.

Of the 36-mile-long parkway, 24 miles would be new road. The remainder includes portions of existing I-75 in Loudon and Anderson counties that will be improved as part of the project.

Records show TDOT estimated in 2001 that 16,800 to 31,500 vehicles a day would use the parkway. A large segment of that traffic would be commercial trucks that no longer would have to travel downtown to reach I-75, the report states.

Since April 2004, 19 people recommended by the local Regional Transportation Planning Organization have been chiseling a path for the parkway, formally called the Orange Route. The resource team consists of people from the affected communities and governments, businesspeople and environmentalists. One team member, Roy Arthur, who represented the Beaver Creek Task Force, withdrew from the group because of time constraints.

TDOT instructed the resource team to select a route and interchanges for the highway from a 1,000-foot-wide corridor that slashes through pastoral Hardin Valley. Last year, the team members appeared so divided that some participants wondered if they would arrive at any decisions.

But somewhere among the more than dozen meetings the group attended, the team seemed to come together, officials said.

"I think we learned the art of compromise, so yes, we have evolved," Todd said.

Ed Cole, chief of environment and planning for TDOT, who has attended many of the resource team meetings, said a January gathering of the group highlighted the concept of



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The Knoxville Regional Parkway, which is in the planning stages, is designed to relieve congested downtown traffic. Here traffic enters the interstate from Western Avenue.

public involvement in road building.

"There was a point in that meeting when I wish the whole state could have been there," said Cole, the second-in-command in TDOT. "It was a defining moment for the team to balance the issue of the caves and the proximity to homes."

Mike Russell, TDOT's project manager for the parkway, said the January meeting was where the group "finally came together as a team and bonded."

Still time to comment While the resource team is a month away from a final recommendation, authorities said this last round of public workshops can provide valuable input that could alter the project.

"It's another opportunity for the community to have a wish list," Russell said.

Suggestions Russell expects include straightening local roads near the proposed parkway, providing wildlife crossings and maintaining traffic on roads during construction.

TDOT and the resource team already have agreed to review fixing the accident-prone intersection in Solway of Oak Ridge Highway and Solway Road by providing an interchange at Oak Ridge Highway and Pellissippi Parkway. Plans also call for upgrading the interchange at Hardin Valley Road and Pellissippi Parkway.

"Things like this we are still looking at and some of these are things that could be done before construction begins," Russell said.

For the most part, the resource team stayed within the 1,000-foot-wide corridor suggested by TDOT, swinging the highway back and forth within the corridor to avoid homes, streams, caves and unfriendly geography. The parkway will require a minimum right of way of 300 feet.

There are two notable deviations from the corridor. In Hardin Valley, the team chose to swing the route east of the corridor to avoid some houses. In Claxton, the team is recommending that the parkway run west of the corridor onto a ridge to avoid a church and residences.

Last August, the team concluded that the parkway would have two interchanges between Loudon and Anderson counties. One would be at Pellissippi Parkway and the other at Clinton Highway. The team rejected three other proposed interchanges at Hardin Valley Road, Oak Ridge Highway and Raccoon Valley Road.

Now two groups of landowners are trying to get the team to reconsider those decisions.

Doug Horne, chairman of Horne Properties Inc., made a presentation last November to the team in hopes of convincing them to add an interchange at Hickory Creek Road. Horne said that the interchange would prompt commercial development on land between Watt Road and U.S. Highway 321.

Horne Properties has extensive holdings in that area, according to property records.

"An interchange at Hickory Creek could open the door for development that far exceeds Turkey Creek and everyone can understand the value of this in jobs, tax base and growth benefits for Loudon County," Horne wrote the team.

Another group initiated by an out-of-state landowner appeared before the team last fall to request an interchange at Raccoon Valley Road. The group got about 400 names on a petition seeking the already rejected interchange, according to TDOT.

"The resource team said, 'If we go back and open the discussion on interchanges, then what else can be re-opened,'" Russell said. "They were quite frustrated. They asked them (landowners) where had they been for the last year."

David Lindeman, vice president of Palmer Engineering, which has been overseeing the \$1.1 million public involvement process for the parkway, said he expects large crowds at this round of meetings.

About 1,300 people attended the four public workshops held in August 2004. Another round of four public meetings in June 2005 drew 598 people.

"I would expect we'll have more people just to see what the team has settled on," Lindeman said. "We're planning on crowds equal to the first round of meetings."

Russell expects an especially large turnout at the Claxton meeting Feb. 23 because of the mobilization of residents to restore an interchange at Raccoon Valley Road.

What's next In March, members of the resource team will meet once again to consider the latest public input and then send their route recommendation to TDOT officials in Nashville.

Cole said in April or May Russell will present the team's recommendations to a "technical review team" of TDOT planners and engineers who will determine if the suggested route is feasible.

"The process wouldn't have worked right if that team finds a problem," Cole said. "The goal is that they would approve it right then."

From there, Cole said, the state would embark on its final Environmental Impact Study, which includes more public input meetings. That process can take up to 18 months, but Cole said he hopes public meetings are under way this fall.

If there are no show-stoppers uncovered by the final EIS, Cole said right-of-way acquisition for the parkway could begin in 2008.

Russell said there's a lot of public participation still required. Elements such as landscaping, lighting and noise barriers must be decided by a Context Sensitive Design team. Several members of the resource team said they would consider continuing their involvement as the project progresses.

"I'm going to have a bulldozer within 100 feet of my house, so I want to stay involved," Todd said.

Carolyn Greenwood, a working mother of two school-age children who represents the Karns community, also said she would be willing to help design the parkway.

"I think there's even more of a chance to make a difference about what it looks like," Greenwood said.

When the state put together a draft EIS in 2001, the road was estimated to cost \$287 million and displace 109 homes. A re-evaluation in 2005 shows 134 homes and six businesses will be displaced because of continued development along the route. And Cole now estimates that the parkway will cost \$500 million to \$600 million.

Residents along the route, Todd said, need a final decision from the state on the parkway.

"You can't plan anything," she said. "I think most people would like some resolution."

But looming in the background is the specter of a lawsuit to halt the project. Mark Richey, president of Citizens Against the Beltway Orange Location, said the group continues to retain an attorney for that purpose.

"We still don't know the criteria they (TDOT) used to select this route," Richey said. "We have an attorney and are still reviewing the options."

Despite the 23-month planning process with the resource team, Cole said he endorses the concept of public input in developing road projects.

"Through this process, we have a better idea of what the public wants, rather than what a special-interest group says what the public wants," he said.

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