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## Miles To Go

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**Caption:** (Map) Planned route NEWS SENTINEL

(Color) A survey marker stands at one of the possible interchange sites for the Knoxville Parkway in Loudon County. The marker is located at the Buttermilk Road overpass at Interstate 40. PAUL EFIRD/NEWS SENTINEL; DIGITAL PHOTO - SURVEY MARKER.PE.JPG

(Chart) Public meeting comments Source: Tennessee Department of Transportation

**DON JACOBS, [jacobs@knews.com](mailto:jacobs@knews.com)**

They can't agree on how to reach decisions. And they haven't agreed on what needs to be decided.

They can't even agree on what they've already agreed to.

Welcome to the world of public involvement formulating the path and design of a major and controversial road project.

Since April 2004, 19 people have been meeting as part of an abbreviated version of the Context Sensitive Solutions concept applied to the proposed Knoxville Regional Parkway. If built, the road, formerly called the Orange Route, will be designated State Route 475.

The members of the Knoxville Regional Parkway Design Resource Team were gleaned from communities affected by the route, area business interests, environmental groups and government representatives from the three counties touched by the route.

Resource team members have met nine times, with sessions ranging from four to eight hours long. Team members said that as

of March, they have invested between 40 and 100 hours of their time in the effort.

Yet the resource team tasked with recommending a route for the Knoxville Parkway is months behind schedule, fraught with friction among the members and beleaguered with distrust for each other and the process in which they are engaged.

Even a decision by the group that was announced in a Tennessee Department of Transportation newsletter to eliminate the Hardin Valley Road interchange is in dispute. Some members say they never voted on the question.

And although some members of the team have considered resigning, most still think something beneficial will arise from their work.

"No matter how tough it gets and people **go** at each other, nobody says just **go** away and build it," said Ed Cole, chief of environment and planning with TDOT.

Steeped in controversy

Citizen groups quickly rallied after TDOT announced in the late 1990s a Knoxville bypass was in the works. The most active group is Citizens Against the Beltway Orange Location, which was created in 1997.

"We've always maintained there's not been a demonstrated need for the road," said Mark Richey, president of CABOL.

TDOT selected the Orange Route over a Blue Route that would have skirted Oak Ridge and a Green Route that would have partially followed Pellissippi Parkway. The purpose of the S.R. 475 bypass, according to TDOT, is to alleviate the congestion caused daily by the flow of 160,000 vehicles passing the Papermill Drive area on the commingled Interstate 40/75.

The proposed 36.5-**mile**-long, four-lane road would join Interstate 75 in Loudon County to I-75 in Anderson County near Wolf Valley Road. The route will lay a 300-foot-wide swath of asphalt and right-of-way through some of the most pastoral land in Knox County.

Despite TDOT's tardy commitment to involve the impacted communities in the planning and design process of the route, CABOL remains opposed to the project.

"The overall reality of the process being utilized by TDOT is that no matter what changes in the Orange Route are made to minimize its environmental impact, the need and benefits of the project remain dubious," Richey wrote on CABOL's Web site.

Richey noted that having CABOL member Robert Shaw, of Anderson County, on the resource team "is only a hedge against the possibility that the road may eventually be constructed ... "

Richey said CABOL continues to retain environmental attorney Joe McCaleb "with the full intention of taking legal action" once TDOT settles on a road design.

Fractured process

TDOT's decision to involve the public in designing the Knoxville Regional Parkway reinforced animosity toward the project.

"The Orange Route is a prime example of the tensions created when you don't involve the public early," TDOT's Cole said.

With the creation of the resource team, TDOT noted it was applying a Context Sensitive Solutions concept to the project. The CSS concept, however, involves public participation in deciding whether a road is needed and then fitting it within the community in a noninvasive way.

With the Orange Route, TDOT selected it over two other options and even designated a 1,000-foot-wide corridor for the road. The resource team was told to place the 300-foot-wide parkway within that corridor.

"To be able to select a 300-foot route within a 1,000-foot corridor, I don't think the community will feel we've been involved," CABOL's Shaw said during a meeting.

"I don't think the public is going to be happy with any of our decisions."

Shaw and Roland Terrell, who represents the Solway Area Residents Association, have repeatedly challenged TDOT on its partial CSS process. The men question how TDOT can contend the resource team is involved in a CSS process when the most important part of the concept -- deciding if a road is needed -- wasn't included.

"There's some thought that people with economic interests were heard, but the people in the pathway didn't have a voice," Terrell said. "We're all trying to ride a horse with a burr under the saddle."

Cole agreed the group is not engaged in a "pure CSS" process, and he told the resource team "you all are facing the consequences" of that failing.

Resource team member Wes Stowers agreed TDOT's former administration fumbled the public relations ball with the Orange Route. Stowers, who owns Stowers Machinery Corp. in Knoxville, represents the Knoxville Area Chamber Partnership on the team.

"I think if TDOT had talked to the community leaders early, we wouldn't have the problems we're having now," Stowers said.

Greg Fay, general manager of Clinton Utilities Board who represents the East Tennessee Economic Development Agency on the team, wondered where the project would be now if TDOT had applied the CSS process to the proposed bypass years ago.

"There's a good chance we would already be driving on part of this road," Fay said.

Even the public involvement aspect of the project hasn't been without snafus.

Carolyn Greenwood, who represents the Karns community on the team, said public input has been selectively used by TDOT. Greenwood is opposed to the project because of the lack of justification for the road.

"I haven't seen evidence that they have given the public comments enough attention," said Greenwood, the working mother of two school-age children.

Greenwood said TDOT noted public support for an Oak Ridge highway interchange, while at the same time the agency ignored comments that the Orange Route is too close to Knoxville.

When Greenwood reviewed a TDOT Web site containing summaries of comments from four public meetings conducted in August 2004, she found errors.

"It came out looking like people in Karns supported the project, and I went back and reviewed those forms and found that wasn't the case," Greenwood said.

"That's when I got shook. That's when I became less of a team player. They said it was not bad faith, just a mistake, and I hope that's true."

TDOT corrected the misinformation in November 2004 after Greenwood brought it to the agency's attention.

David Lindeman, vice president of Palmer Engineering, said he was warned by TDOT that the parkway project elicited passionate emotions in the community. Palmer Engineering is a Kentucky firm that has applied the CSS process to a dozen projects and is overseeing the design of the Knoxville Parkway.

"We knew going in there would be issues," Lindeman said. "I was warned that this was a controversial project."

Lindeman said the Knoxville Parkway has been the most contentious project in which he's been involved.

Filibustering the process

The frustrations of resource team members gushed to the surface at a February meeting when the group assessed the status of its progress.

"I'm disappointed that some of the folks here have an agenda to stop the project or build it someplace else, and that's not our job," said Steve Fritts, who represents the Tennessee Technology Corridor Development Authority on the resource team, during the meeting.

"I hope that's not the case, but if it is, we're going to have a hard time getting anything done."

Fritts, a landscape architect who also has some experience in road planning, said later, "I thought it was time in the process to make a statement to have honest and open dialogue."

Fritts has been a Hardin Valley resident since 1994. He said he initially opposed the Orange Route.

"Hardin Valley is one of the few pristine areas left in West Knox County and to see that impacted troubled me greatly," he said.

Yet he opted to put aside his residential hat to be a productive member of team.

"I felt if the road was coming through the valley, we should try to make it have the least impact on the area," he said.

Fritts' comments at the meeting were the opening volley of a discussion that laid bare tensions fueled by months of sessions with little to show for it.

"I think we're straining against each other rather than working together," said Bill McMaster, who represents the Heiskell community on the resource team.

"We're not a team," Solway's Terrell said. "We're a group of individuals representing a wide-ranging view of interests."

"I won't be the patsy for the governor or Mr. (TDOT Commissioner Gerald) Nicely. If we can't reach a consensus, if we're a hung jury, let them either make the decisions or start over again, but I won't take a bullet for them."

"I don't want this to be a joke," Karns' Greenwood said. "I don't want this to be another road where people say, 'Can you believe what they did with that so-called bypass?'"

The sharp comments should not have surprised anyone connected to the process. Fritts simply lanced a boil that had been trying to ooze for months.

In December, TDOT had Mary English, a research leader with the University of Tennessee's Energy, Environment and Resources Center, poll the resource team members to gauge the group's status. The results were strident.

English noted 10 members commented others may not be clear on the mission of team. English took pains in her report to not identify the speakers of the comments she quoted. Nine members of the team represent communities and environmental groups, while 10 come from governments and business interests.

"Several elaborated that some of the other members have not bought into the objective of the process they want to alter or stop the road project," English wrote in her report.

"These members added that because of this obstructionist attitude, the process is frustrating and is 'digressing backward.' Another said that those who are not committed to the mission statement should respectfully resign."

At least one member told English that Palmer Engineering employees were steamrolling the group to a predetermined conclusion. That unidentified member mentioned they were considering resigning from the team.

In interviews for this story, Solway's Terrell said, "The thought has crossed my mind, but I'm not a quitter."

Karns' Greenwood said she also has considered resigning from the team.

"But I'm still hanging in there," she said.

Picking up steam

As hard as the process has been for the resource team for the past 11 months, officials promise it's going to get tougher.

"As you move forward, it will get more tense," TDOT's Cole said. "I think we're beginning to see that now."

Under the tutelage of Palmer Engineering, the team has undergone a crash course on road planning, congestion and environmental issues.

"We have gone to parkway school for a year," ETEDA's Fay said. "I understand interchanges, acoustics, medians, road footprints, all those things."

In addition to the 19 members of the resource team, several subcommittees have been hard at work reviewing designated portions of the proposed route. Four regional subcommittees -- each with six or seven members of the community -- have been studying the road alignment in Loudon County, Hardin Valley, Solway and Karns and the Claxton, Powell and Heiskell areas.

Community members from those subcommittees also joined with resource team members to form four issue groups. Those issues include interchange locations, air quality and noise, caves and streams and greenway options.

The issue groups and subcommittees make recommendations to the resource team, which is tasked with making final recommendations to TDOT.

The Hardin Valley subcommittee recommended the abolition of the Hardin Valley/Marietta Church roads interchange, and it appeared the resource team supported the suggestion. But there was no official vote on the recommendation.

When a TDOT newsletter distributed in February to thousands of people interested in the project announced the resource team had dropped the Hardin Valley interchange, some team members balked.

"There has not been a vote to eliminate the Hardin Valley interchange," ETEDA's Fay said. "The team has that under consideration."

Other team members said it was misleading to tell the community the Hardin Valley Road interchange was off the table when TDOT's Nicely can resurrect it.

Some members of the resource team argue a true bypass wouldn't have any interchanges along the route. Others contend the route should have several so the road can serve local traffic.

"If you put a bunch of interchanges on this, you'll just move the congestion from where it is to a new place," CABOL's Shaw said.

Other items yet to be decided by the resource team include an alignment that spares farms and homes within the corridor, appearance and design speed of the road, berms, road elevation, noise barriers, landscaping and if it will be divided by a grassy median.

Some members want to use environmental concerns to make design decisions, while others counter such expertise should be left to the TDOT experts.

As of February, the resource team was unsure how it should reach decisions. Some suggested a simple majority vote, some favored a two-thirds majority and others felt the group should issue two reports, representing majority and minority concerns.

"We knew we were in trouble when it took us an hour and a half to get a name for this thing," quipped ETEDA's Fay during one meeting, momentarily gelling the group with laughter.

Karns' Greenwood scoffed at the idea the team would arrive at a consensus on the issues.

"I think it's safe to say we're not going to reach a consensus on most things," she said. "I support a majority report. I think that's the only way we're going to accomplish anything."

TDOT's Cole said the team decision process is one of several lessons the agency has learned from the CSS effort, which is expected to rack up a \$1.1 million bill.

"We will have to do a better job in the future conveying how to reach a consensus," he said.

The original timetable for the CSS process noted public meetings would be held this month so people could review suggested road alignments and interchanges. Palmer's Lindeman says those public meetings won't occur until June.

In addition, the resource team was slated to issue its final report to

TDOT in October. That also has been delayed.

"I anticipate a two- or three-month delay," Lindeman said. "We want to do things right rather than rush to meet a deadline."

Lindeman blamed the delays not on the resource team but on design consultants who haven't been able to get studies ready for the team's purview.

Despite the tensions and delays, resource team members remain committed to the process with hopes their involvement will reap dividends.

The Chamber's Stowers recalled controversies that swirled around the Pellissippi Parkway when it was proposed by TDOT. Now the road is a vital link between Oak Ridge and McGhee Tyson Airport.

"That project almost got tabled because of a horse farm," Stowers said. "Imagine where we would be now without Pellissippi Parkway."

When completed years from now, the Knoxville Regional Parkway "will be just like Pellissippi Parkway is now," he said.

"This road has been painted as something cataclysmic, when in fact it will serve a million people in the MSA (Metropolitan Statistical Area). We have so many pluses in this area, the beauty, the water... . I wouldn't want to do anything to damage that."

But Stowers said the team has to finish its task so TDOT can move forward and remove the air of uncertainty that pervades residents and businesses along the route.

"Think of the hell these people are going through not knowing if they can sell or improve their property," he said.

David Reister, who represents the Sierra Club on the team, agreed it's time to tackle the tough decisions.

"I feel we should move with all dispatch so the state can **go** out and lay a corridor," Reister said. "Up to this point, we've sort of been getting ready to make decisions. Now the rubber should be meeting the road."

Despite their misgivings and stumbles, every resource team member queried for this article said they supported the CSS process to involve the public.

"I think we will come up with a recommendation, and it will be slightly better than it would have been without us," Karns' Greenwood said.

ETEDA's Fay enthusiastically supported the public involvement concept for future TDOT projects.

But has it been worth his time thus far?

"That's like asking the chef if his time was worth the meal," Fay said. "I'm in the kitchen. If the turkey's burnt, I'll say it's been a colossal waste of time. But I'm optimistic that won't be the case."

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#### KNOXVILLE PARKWAY TIMELINE

1971 East Tennessee Development District proposes a northern bypass around Knoxville.

1994 Knoxville Metropolitan Planning Organization and ETDD ask the Tennessee Department of Transportation to study a beltway.

1997 TDOT conducts five public meetings to obtain feedback on two proposed routes, blue and orange. The Blue Route would skirt Oak Ridge. A third option, a Green Route that would use a portion of Pellissippi Parkway, surfaces.

December 2001 Federal agencies approve the Draft Environmental Impact Statement required to justify the project.

February-March 2002 TDOT conducts five public hearings on the three potential routes.

July 2002 TDOT announces it will proceed with the Orange Route. The proposed route immediately becomes a political issue. Gubernatorial candidate Phil Bredesen taps into the residential uproar against the Orange Route and wins Knox County at the polls.

2003 Gov. Bredesen's TDOT Commissioner Gerald Nicely asks the University of Tennessee Center for Transportation Research to review the Orange Route selection process.

August 2003 UT study recommends TDOT involve the public in road planning process.

November 2003 Nicely announces the Orange Route will **go** forward, but only after significant public involvement using the Context Sensitive Solutions concept.

April 2004 Nineteen-member Knoxville Regional Parkway Design Resource Team, appointed by the Knoxville Regional Transportation Planning Organization and approved by TDOT, has its first meeting.

August 2004 Four public meetings solicit information from residents along the route.

May or June 2005 Four public meetings originally slated for March to be held so people can review potential alternative routes within a corridor selected by TDOT.

September 2005 Design Team presents its alignment selections, interchanges and road features in four public meetings.

October 2005 Design Team presents TDOT with its final recommendations on route.

Construction Undetermined. No funding allocated for construction or right-of-way acquisition.

Source: Tennessee Department of Transportation

#### OTHER CONTEXT SENSITIVE SOLUTIONS PROJECTS ACROSS THE STATE

State Route 126 (Memorial Highway) in Kingsport, is touted as the pilot CSS project for the state. Seventeen-member CSS team began in September 2003 to study ways to make road safer from downtown Kingsport to Interstate 81.

U.S. 321 in Gatlinburg, where 13 members of the CSS team are tasked with retrofitting changes to 1.5 **miles** of road and advising on design of another 1.5-**mile** stretch yet to be constructed.

State Route 357 extension in Sullivan County, where it would cross Boone Lake and present environmental challenges. The Federal Highway Administration has agreed to use it as a study project for streamlining the CSS process, making it eligible for federal funding.

State Route 28 (U.S. 127 South) in Cumberland County, south of Crossville, from Cleveland Street to State Route 68. Project runs



through Cumberland Homesteads Historic District and involves a five-lane highway.

U.S. 127 North runs from Interstate 40 in Crossville to State Route 62 in Clarkrange in adjoining Fentress County. Road is a hilly, two-lane route that TDOT opted in October 2003 to move forward with a CSS team to determine if new road will follow existing route or move road in western direction.

Appalachian Corridor J (State Route 451) is a missing section of road from State Route 111 to State Route 56 near Cookeville that will complete the Appalachian Development Highway System that runs from Chattanooga to the Kentucky line. Representatives from six counties and eight cities constitute the CSS team that is expected to finalize a report this spring.

State Route 397 (Mack Hatcher Memorial Parkway) is in Williamson County, where part of the road needs improvement and Franklin officials want it extended westward to complete a loop around the city. The western loop would divert traffic from downtown Franklin. Six possible routes have been identified.

State Route 840 South runs south of Nashville in Williamson County and has generated tension in the community. The CSS process is being applied to a 10-**mile** section yet to be built that will be part of a 77-**mile**-long road that was launched in 1991 and runs from I-40 in Wilson County to I-40 in Dickson County. This project is similar to the Knoxville Parkway in that a 1,000-foot-wide corridor already had been selected to promote economic development in the area. The CSS team should report this spring.

Source: Tennessee Department of Transportation

