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Property owners' comments spur TDOT investigation

By **DON JACOBS**, jacobs@knews.com
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Tennessee Department of Transportation Commissioner Gerald Nicely ordered an investigation into complaints from business owners whose properties are needed for road construction downtown.

Nicely wants to be sure business and property owners were offered fair amounts for their losses and that TDOT negotiators behaved professionally, said TDOT spokeswoman Kim Keelor.

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The probe, Keelor said, was prompted by comments made to the News Sentinel by business owners impacted by the project that will widen Interstate 40 and extend Hall of Fame Drive from Summit Hill Drive to Broadway.

"The commissioner is exceedingly concerned by the one gentleman's comments, and he wants to find out what happened," Keelor said.

Marvin Thomas, owner of The Lighting Gallery and Electric Supply Co. on Magnolia Avenue, said a TDOT negotiator offered him and his father about half of the value of their property, based on an appraisal last year. When they questioned the amount, Thomas said, the negotiator said in a bullying manner that the property would be condemned by the state.

Keelor said if TDOT negotiators are unable to reach a settlement with property owners, the state attorney general files a condemnation lawsuit in the local court. That process, she said, can take six weeks to a year.

"We don't want to go to court because that has, in some cases, held up projects for years," Keelor said.

By late last week, Thomas said he already received an apology from Fred Corum, director of TDOT Region 1 in East Tennessee, and a new appraisal was ordered for his businesses.

"You got results," Thomas said Friday. "The power of the pen is mightier than the bureaucracy. Maybe the new commissioner is trying to change things."

Keelor said Nicely is sending Mike Clinard, TDOT transportation manager from the right of way division, to Knoxville on Tuesday. Clinard said he and another manager will gather information used to make offers to business and property owners

"We're not coming in to negate offers already made," Clinard said. "Our duty is to make sure the property owners are getting everything that is available to them under law."

Keelor said Clinard will visit only with business owners who voiced their unhappiness with the acquisition process.

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"We've only had one letter of complaint, and that person was met with already," Keelor said.

"It seems homeowners generally feel they are compensated fairly more often than business owners, I guess because with businesses, there are so many intangibles involved," she said.

"But these people deserve to be treated fairly because of their inconveniences. We are here to help people through this process, not to torture them."

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