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Balkers upset parkway team

Some who worked on Orange Route may refuse to sign final report

By **DON JACOBS**, jacobs@knews.com
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After nearly two years of work, some members of the team that cobbled together a path for the controversial Orange Route may refuse to sign off on the group's report.

"It's almost like betrayal," said Karen Nolt, who represents the Knox County Parks and Recreation Department on the 18-member team.

The bombshell was dropped Wednesday during what was slated to be the last meeting of the Knoxville Regional Parkway Design Resource Team. Fifteen members of the team attended the meeting expecting to finish final recommendations to the Tennessee Department of Transportation on the proposed parkway.

"I think it's a betrayal of our mission statement we signed two years ago," said Wes Stowers, a Knoxville businessman who represents the Knoxville Area Chamber Partnership on the team.

"I'm hopeful the two or three who have expressed concerns about signing will reconsider their moral obligation. I don't like everything in the report either, but I compromised in order to reach a consensus."

Since April 2004 the team has been trying to position a 300-foot-wide road project within a 1,000-foot-wide corridor pre-selected by TDOT. The road, which will be designated State Route 475 when built, is supposed to help alleviate downtown traffic congestion.

The four-lane, median-divided Knoxville Regional Parkway, also known as the Orange Route, would connect Interstate 75 in Loudon County with I-75 in Anderson County. The route slashes through Hardin Valley in West Knox County, where a groundswell of opposition to the parkway originated.

State road planners contend the proposed 26.5-mile parkway, which could cost \$500 million-\$600 million, will divert traffic from downtown that now uses the commingled Interstate 40/75. TDOT documents state commercial trucks would use the parkway to avoid downtown.

Opponents of the project contend the parkway is too close to Knoxville and will be obsolete before its completion. A more suitable route, opponents argue, would be farther west looping through Roane and Anderson counties.

After more than a dozen meetings and hundreds of volunteer hours, the group dug in for an eight-hour session designed to complete their task. When it was apparent another meeting was needed, team member Roland Terrell, who represents the Solway Area Residents Association, mentioned problems with signing the report.

"I think there are a significant number of people who are not willing to sign this report," Terrell said.

Steve Fritts, who represents the Tennessee Technology Corridor Development Agency on the team, expressed dismay.

"I would be heartily disappointed if there was a significant number of people who refused to sign this report," Fritts said.

"I didn't agree with the Orange Route either, but I accepted the responsibility and tried to complete the job TDOT asked us to do."

Carolyn Greenwood, a working mother of two who represents the Karns community on the team, said she wasn't prepared to sign the report.

"I feel like I'm morally obligated to object to something that the community does not support," she said.

Greenwood said she began having misgivings two weeks ago about signing the report.

"Obviously, my intent was not to betray anybody, or I wouldn't have put two years of my life into it," she said.

Greenwood said she objects to "the whole tone" of the report, which she likened to "a press relations piece rather than a serious report." Overall, she said, the report "looked a little too rosy and it didn't convey the difficulties we've encountered."

"I'm just trying to balance my allegiance with this group with my own integrity and my commitment to the community," she said.

Robert Shaw, who represents the Citizens Against the Beltway Orange Location on the team, said a minority report opposing the project and how it was selected is being circulated. Shaw and Greenwood said the minority report is undergoing revisions but will be submitted with the official team report.

David Lindeman, vice president of Palmer Engineering, said he's seen other members of community groups tasked with developing a road project refuse to sign off on their own report. Palmer Engineering has overseen the \$1.1 million parkway design team efforts.

"Essentially, the people who had the most input into the process refused to sign it because they didn't think the project was needed," Lindeman said of a recent project in Crossville.

Five team members on Tuesday signed off on the six-page draft report. Officials scheduled a team meeting next week to finalize the report and try to get everyone's signatures.

Mike Russell, TDOT project manager for the parkway, said the team's final report - no matter how many signatures it contains - will be presented April 12 to a TDOT technical review team. If the review team has no questions about the team's report, Russell said he will then present the report to TDOT Commissioner Gerald Nicely.

Nicely will make the final decision about accepting the team's report on how to position the parkway, the number of interchanges it will contain and improvements to roads impacted by the proposed highway.

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