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Parkway: Public has its say

But a minority report - two, actually - also issued by citizen team

**By DON JACOBS, jacobs@knews.com
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After two years of public input, planning for the proposed Orange Route bypass has officially returned to the Tennessee Department of Transportation.

All 17 active members of the Knoxville Regional Parkway Design Resource Team on Wednesday signed a seven-page report listing their recommendations for the proposed road. TDOT officials will review the team's recommendations April 12 and then present the report to Commissioner Gerald Nicely for a final decision on the project.

TDOT officials said property acquisition for the project could begin as early as 2008. Officials estimate the 22.5-mile-long parkway, which would be designated State Route 475 if built, could cost \$500 million to \$600 million.

Wednesday's meeting concluded a citizens' input process that began in April 2004. The process included a dozen public meetings that drew 2,736 people and forced community members and economic developers to compromise on road recommendations.

"I am very pleased that this team came together and functioned as it was originally designed to," said Greg Fay, who represented the East Tennessee Economic Development Agency on the resource team.

"People put personalities aside and personal agendas aside to put together the best possible document to build this absolutely necessary parkway," Fay said.

The need for the parkway and its location have been contested by citizen groups for a decade. The parkway is designed to connect Interstate 75 in Loudon County with I-75 in Anderson County.

That link, TDOT contends, will help alleviate downtown Knoxville congestion aggravated by the commingled Interstate 40/75 that runs through the heart of the city. A new bypass, TDOT said, will mainly divert commercial trucks from the downtown area.

To involve the public in a contentious project, TDOT asked that a team of people representing affected communities, local governments and business interests compile recommendations on the proposed parkway. The group addressed the kind of road, placement of interchanges, lighting along the route and improvements to local roads in its report.

TDOT's Nicely, however, will get more than one report from the group.

Robert Shaw, who represented the Citizens Against the Beltway Orange Location, authored a minority report that reiterated opposition for the proposed parkway through Hardin Valley. Shaw's five-page report was signed by the seven community representatives on the 17-member resource team.

"We recommend that TDOT stop wasting money on this road immediately and start considering other, more effective options for solving Knoxville's transportation problems, now and in the future," states Shaw's report.

The report noted that the proposed parkway is too close to Knoxville to serve as a bypass. It also said air and water quality will suffer and that the route is hampered by caves and sinkholes.

"It has become obvious that economic development is the primary impetus behind this road,

despite the fact that it was sold to the public as a way to relieve traffic congestion," states the report.

After Wednesday's meeting, Shaw endorsed the concept of public involvement in planning roads. The process, however, needs to begin with deciding that a road is needed, he said.

"A lot of us felt we were herded to the conclusions TDOT wanted," Shaw said.

The inclusion of Shaw's minority report with the group report is what convinced Carolyn Greenwood to sign the majority report. Greenwood is a working mother of two who represented the Karns community.

"I was concerned that the report indicated everything was fine and didn't show the community's voice," Greenwood said. "I signed it after I was sure the minority report wouldn't be shuffled to the side somewhere."

To counter the community representatives' report, Knoxville businessman Wes Stowers wrote his own minority report. Stowers represented the Knoxville Area Chamber Partnership on the resource team. Eight team members, including a representative from the Sierra Club, signed Stowers' report.

Stowers' report notes the need for a parkway because of the onslaught of commercial traffic from I-40, I-75 and Interstate 81. The parkway, Stowers wrote, is the western leg of a 180-degree beltway that will eventually loop around north Knox County.

Stowers wrote that environmental concerns "are overstated" because trucks and cars will burn fuel more efficiently by the time the parkway is built. Stowers said a review of bypasses nationwide show most of those roads are closer to the heart of a city than the proposed Knoxville parkway.

"People don't like the term 'economic development,' but that is jobs," Stowers said. "And anytime a company looks to relocate, they look at the infrastructure - transportation."

Mike Russell, TDOT project manager for the parkway, said the delay in order to garner public input was worthwhile.

"Do we really want to go behind closed doors and try to defend it later?" Russell said. "As a taxpayer, I want to know how those decisions are made."

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