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## Nicely still mulling over Orange Route

By **DON JACOBS**, [jacobs@knews.com](mailto:jacobs@knews.com)  
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Tennessee Department of Transportation Commissioner Gerald Nicely said he hopes to announce his decision on the proposed Knoxville Regional Parkway on June 19.

"Right now, I want to announce my decision at the TPO's June 19 meeting," Nicely said. "That's my goal right now."

The Knoxville Regional Transportation Planning Organization has scheduled a 10 a.m. June 19 special meeting in the small assembly room of the City County Building for the announcement, according to Jeff Welch, executive director of the TPO. The Knoxville Regional TPO sets transportation priorities and includes government representatives from Knox, Blount, Loudon and Sevier counties.

Nicely's decision could end nearly a decade of controversy concerning a beltway around Knoxville. His decision also could launch a round of lawsuits from groups opposed to the route.

The proposed parkway would connect Interstate 75 in Loudon County to I-75 in Anderson County near Wolf Valley Road. Upon completion, the road, also called the Orange Route, would be designated State Route 475.

TDOT planners said the beltway is needed to alleviate congestion on the co-mingled Interstate 40/75 through downtown Knoxville. Records show that 165,000 vehicles a day travel on I-40/75 at Papermill Drive. TDOT said commercial truckers would be the most likely users of the beltway.

For the past two years, a 17-member Knoxville Regional Parkway Design Resource Team has been considering the best route for the beltway through pastoral Hardin Valley. The group of citizens and representatives from local governments and business interests compiled recommendations on how best to situate the road within a 1,000-foot corridor preselected by TDOT.

The resource team settled on a 22.5-mile, four-lane highway with a divided median and a 70-mph design speed. The team recommended interchanges at Clinton Highway and Pellissippi Parkway.

Recommendations from the team included upgrading interchanges at Pellissippi Parkway and Hardin Valley Road and at Oak Ridge Highway and Solway Road. Team members also asked TDOT to widen or improve nearly a dozen local roads as part of the beltway project.

Estimates place the cost of the project at \$500 million to \$600 million.

Nicely said this week that he hasn't had time to review the resource team's recommendations. The commissioner also has been running the state Department of Safety after scandals rocked that agency.

Nicely also has to look at two minority reports submitted by resource team members.

One report urges him to trash the Orange Route through Hardin Valley and begin a new process to address congestion on I-40/75. That report was signed by seven team members representing communities that would be affected by the proposed beltway.

That report contends the beltway is too close to Knoxville, won't alleviate traffic, is plagued with caves and sinkholes, and will adversely impact air quality.

The other minority report asked Nicely to reject arguments against the parkway and urged

him to move forward with the eastern leg of the proposed beltway that could link I-75 with I-40 or Interstate 81. That report was signed by eight team members who represented local governments and business interests. The representative from the Sierra Club also endorsed that report.

Two local lawmakers last month sent letters to Nicely and Gov. Phil Bredesen asking him to begin the planning process anew.

"I would urge you to accept the input of the citizens and the community members of the Resource Team and shelve the Orange Route selection, while requiring TDOT to go back to the drawing board and initiate an honest process that will come up with the best solution to Knoxville's traffic congestion and air pollution problems and maximize use of our tax dollars," states the letters signed by state Sen. Tim Burchett, R-Knoxville, and state Rep. Parkey Strader, R-Knoxville.

Both Burchett and Strader said Thursday that they think a beltway is needed but that they believe the route should loop farther west toward Roane and Anderson counties. Both men also said they expected their letters against the Orange Route to carry little weight with the decision makers.

"Unfortunately, I know I'm tilting at windmills because the political support is there for the Orange Route," Burchett said.

Nicely said this week he was aware of the letters from Strader and Burchett and that he understood they were representing their constituency.

"We're still getting some input, like from the senator, and I think we need to factor these into the decision-making process," the commissioner said. "The idea of starting over again is not appealing to me."

As Nicely mulls his decision, one group has been lobbying to add an interchange to the beltway at Raccoon Valley Road. Clark Hamilton, president of Better Roads in North Knox, appealed to the Anderson County Commission's Operations Committee on May 8 to support the Raccoon Valley Road interchange.

The operations committee by a voice vote rejected the request. Then, the full Anderson County Commission was asked on May 15 to endorse the interchange. The commission refused the endorsement by a 3-9 margin, according to Joanne Anderson, deputy clerk in Anderson County.

"This community really needs the beltway, in my opinion," Hamilton said.

Even though a Raccoon Valley Road interchange would be in Knox County, Hamilton said he went to the Anderson County government for support because that county also would benefit from the proposal. He said he has no plans to submit a similar endorsement request to the Knox County Commission.

Hamilton said BRINK, a loose-knit group of homeowners associations and community members, heartily supported the Orange Route and the eastern leg of the proposed beltway loop.

"It's really going to make this community more livable when the whole loop is finished, and that's when the traffic counts will really shoot up," he said.

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