

KnoxNews

To print this page, select **File** then **Print** from your browser

URL: http://www.knoxnews.com/kns/local_news/article/0,1406,KNS_347_2911491,00.html

Will air sanctions present roadblock for paving projects?

Noncompliant construction could lose federal funds

By **J.J. STAMBAUGH**, stambaugh@knews.com
May 25, 2004

In addition to the possible impact on economic development in East Tennessee, another potential casualty of being designated a federal non-attainment area for ozone pollution is road construction, officials say.

One of the first sanctions that kicked in with the non-attainment designation was a new hurdle to road construction that requires all projects receiving federal highway dollars to conform to regulations that will be handed down next month by the EPA, according to Jeff Welch, director of the Knoxville Regional Transportation Planning Organization.

Advertisement



It remains unclear what the impact will be, but in theory the non-attainment designation could threaten - or at least postpone - a host of road projects including the "Orange Route" beltway that planners hope to build through Loudon and Knox counties, Welch said.

Because most major road projects in the state are administered by the Tennessee Department of Transportation and draw heavily on federal funds, a decision by the EPA to order those dollars to be withheld could be disastrous for road building.

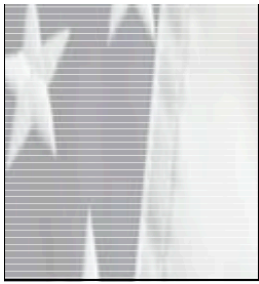
"It'll cost our economy dearly if we don't come together as a community and develop a model where we can meet attainment," said Wes Stowers, who chaired the Transportation Committee of the Knoxville Area Chamber Partnership when the Orange Route was under consideration two years ago.

"The immediate impact is nothing," Welch said. "What we have to do is to develop a long-range transportation program for the non-attainment area and ensure that the plan meets air quality conformity regulations, which haven't been released yet."

Welch said the long-range planning called for by the EPA is designed to prevent an increase in auto emissions that feed into the ozone-forming process.

"As you add new highway projects and new development, typically what happens is that you increase vehicle miles traveled," he said. "The vehicle miles traveled translates into emissions.

"What we have to show is that our long-range transportation plan will not exceed a level that will be determined by the EPA. We'll have to show that our plan won't make things worse from mobile emissions."



Welch, however, believes that most major projects currently under development, including the Orange Route, will probably be safe from the federal government's axe because of cleaner diesel rules and stricter emissions requirements for cars.

"With the cleaner fuels coming online and with cleaner vehicles coming online, we think that (the Orange Route) is probably doable," he said. "But there's not going to be any guarantees. A lot will depend on when that highway will be built in relation with other transportation projects and in relation to growth in the whole non-attainment area.

"It's just not going to be one road or another, and you may have to come down to a decision-making process. Improvements to the Pellissippi Parkway and road projects in Sevier County and others in Knox will all be part of this whole evaluation process."

Edward Cole, TDOT's chief of environment and planning, said "it's way premature" to predict the future of road projects in the affected regions of Tennessee.

Cole said the EPA will give the state an "emissions budget" which should provide opportunities to offset an emissions increase in one area - such as a particular road project - by reducing emissions in another category, such as industry.

If inspection and maintenance programs for vehicles are mandated by the state, for instance, they may reduce ozone-causing chemicals enough to allow for a major project like the Orange Route to go forward, he said.

"It gives you more flexibility," Cole said. "This is a serious issue, but it's not time to put out the death knell on road projects. We're not there yet."

J.J. Stambaugh may be reached at 865-342-6307.

Copyright 2004, KnoxNews. All Rights Reserved.