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TDOT chief says Orange Route a go

Opposition group leader vows to fight; completion of beltway 15-20 years away

By **DON JACOBS**, jacobs@knews.com
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An announcement Monday by state officials that the Orange Route will be built through Hardin Valley was met with disappointment and promises to fight the proposed parkway.

"People who sell bulldozers, beer, cigarettes, gas and lottery tickets are the real beneficiaries here," said Mark Richey, president of the Citizens Against the Beltway Orange Location. "And that's fine, but let's tell everyone what it is.

"It's really a battle of classes - the elite and the regular citizens of Knoxville."

Richey's group of about 150 people has been battling the proposed 27.8-mile road since 1997.

"This is just a skirmish now," Richey said after the Monday announcement. "There are lots of battles to be fought."

Tennessee Department of Transportation Commissioner Gerald Nicely flew to Knoxville to announce his decision about the proposed State Route 475 beltway. Nicely shared his decision during a meeting of the Knoxville



JOE HOWELL
NEWS SENTINEL

Tennessee Department of Transportation Commissioner Gerald Nicely announces that he has accepted the recommendations of the Knoxville Regional Parkway Design Resource Team to construct the Orange Route through Hardin Valley.

Regional Transportation Planning Organization.

Nicely said he accepted the recommendations of a 17-member Knoxville Regional Parkway Design Resource Team. The team of citizens, government representatives and business interests was appointed by the planning organization.

The resource team sited a 300-foot-wide path for SR 475 along a 1,000-foot-wide corridor pre-selected by TDOT. At two points, near Wolf Valley Road and in Hardin Valley, the team moved the roadbed out of the TDOT corridor in order to avoid houses.

TDOT wants to build the four-lane, median-divided highway to connect Interstate 75 in Loudon County to I-75 in Anderson County near Wolf Valley Road. The bypass, TDOT contends, will alleviate congestion in downtown Knoxville by diverting commercial traffic from the co-mingled Interstate 40/75.

Traffic counts last year stated 165,000 vehicles a day were traveling on I-40/75 at Papermill Drive.

But it will be decades before that traffic fix is completed.

First, Nicely said, it will take more than a year to complete a federally mandated environmental impact statement that examines everything from water and air pollution to economic impacts on the region.

"It'll probably be three to four years before you see construction on this project," the commissioner said. Property acquisition could begin in 2008, he said.

Mike Russell, TDOT project manager for the parkway, said once launched, construction would take 15 to 20 years.

Nicely, however, said TDOT is examining the project to determine if it can be accelerated and if new financing methods can be applied. He said officials are reviewing possible public/private partnerships and even tolls to pay for the estimated \$570 million project.

"The old ways of doing things just with gas taxes just won't work in the future," Nicely said.

He did not address a minority report signed by seven of the resource team members that recommended the Orange Route be rejected and a more westerly road studied.

The commissioner did say TDOT was reviewing how local roads along the proposed parkway could be improved, as requested by the resource team.

"It's an issue of money," Nicely said. "I think we've got a commitment to work hard to try to do those."

The commissioner said he's encountered little political pressure concerning interchanges along the parkway. The resource team recommended interchanges at Pellissippi Parkway and Clinton Highway, rejecting several other suggested interchanges. Nicely agreed to the two interchanges only.

"While our first priority is trying to stop the road, I'm still concerned that they can come back later and add interchanges," Richey said.

Ed Cole, chief of environment and planning at TDOT, said the agency is studying the possibility of improving the Solway intersection of Oak Ridge Highway and Pellissippi Parkway before parkway construction begins. The resource team asked TDOT to repair the intersection, which has been the site of several fatal crashes, as part of the overall parkway project.

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