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New titles urged for parkway

Potential outcome: More federal funding, barring of roadside signs

By **DON JACOBS**, jacobs@knews.com
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The proposed Knoxville Regional Parkway inched closer to reality Tuesday with recommendations that the route be designated part of the National Highway System and be deemed a scenic highway.

The technical committee of the Knoxville Regional Transportation Planning Organization agreed to both resolutions, one of which would bar roadside signs. The resolutions next week will go before the full TPO, which represents governments in Knox, Loudon, Blount and Sevier counties.

If the full TPO board approves the resolution designating the proposed parkway as a component of the National Highway System, the state will present the request to the Federal Highway Administration.

Jeff Welch, executive director of the TPO, said the designation will open the proposed parkway, formerly called the Orange Route, to more federal funding. As part of the National Highway System, federal and state funding would shift from an 80/20 match to a 90/10 formula, Welch said.

The National Highway System includes interstate routes and other roads important to the nation's economy, defense and mobility.

The Tennessee Department of Transportation has overseen a process involving local input to situate state Route 475 in West Knox County. The proposed four-lane, divided highway would connect Interstate 75 in Loudon County to I-75 in Anderson County near Wolf Valley Road.

TDOT contends that state Route 475 will alleviate congestion in downtown Knoxville caused by the commingled Interstate 40/75. Up to 165,000 vehicles daily now pass on I-40/75 at Papermill Drive.

The proposed parkway, TDOT states, when first opened will carry 30,540 vehicles daily, with 18 percent composed of commercial trucks. TDOT estimates the road will cost \$570 million and won't be built for 15-20 years.

If the road were built today, it would reduce travel time around Knoxville by one hour and 14 minutes during peak traffic times, according to TDOT. By 2030, the parkway would reduce travel time during rush hours by two hours and 17 minutes, TDOT figures show.

But not everybody is happy with the proposed parkway. Bob Shaw, a member of Citizens Against the Beltway Orange Location, urged the TPO technical committee to carefully consider its vote to obtain National Highway System status for the road.

"I would ask, where is the urgency in this situation?" Shaw said to the committee.

Faced with the prospect of opening more funding sources for the parkway, no one on the committee opposed the designation.

No committee members opposed a request to designate the parkway a scenic highway.

Scenic highways are free of billboards, carry height restrictions for nearby buildings and don't permit junkyards along the route.

Shaw did get the technical committee to pass a resolution requesting "a fair and reasonable analysis" of all alternative routes for the parkway. Shaw said the Blue and Green routes and a no-build option should get equal consideration from TDOT in its final Environmental Impact Study.

The federal government's National Environmental Policy Act mandates a final impact study on all aspects of a road, including environmental, cultural and economic consequences of a road.

"I just think it's important that they examine all the options, and if a statement from the TPO helps that, that's great," Shaw said.

TDOT Commissioner Gerald Nicely in 2003 rejected the Blue and Green routes as options for the parkway. The Blue route would have been further west in Anderson and Roane counties, while the Green route would have followed part of I-140 up to I-75 in Anderson County.

But Ed Cole, chief of environment and planning for TDOT, said Shaw's adopted resolution will have no impact on the Orange route selection.

"If the question is, are we going back to reassess the other options, the answer is no," Cole said Tuesday.

The other options were examined in a draft impact study completed in 2001, and that document will be incorporated into the final study, Cole said.

"That draft met the criteria of a fair and reasonable analysis on the other options," he said.

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