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Parkway opinions wanted

Design of highway will not be decided without public input

By **DON JACOBS**, jacobs@knews.com
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The public this month will get its first shot at configuring the Knoxville Regional Parkway that will slash across three counties in hopes of diverting traffic from the city.

"I'd like to see the turnout measured in hundreds rather than tens," said Robert Shaw, a Claxton resident who is on the Regional Parkway Design Resource Team.

Advertisement The 36.5-mile-long highway is designed to reduce the co-mingled traffic of Interstates 75 and 40 that carry 160,000 vehicles each day to and through downtown Knoxville. The parkway will connect I-75 near Lenoir City with I-75 in Anderson County near Norris. Earlier estimates placed the cost at \$270 million, but officials now say that figure is not applicable.

The path of the four- to six-lane parkway is along Melton Hill Lake and the Clinch River and through the pastoral communities of Hardin Valley, Solway, Karns, Claxton and Powell.

Members of those communities had rallied against the proposed Orange Route in the late 1990s. They argued the beltway wouldn't be effective in diverting traffic from the city and said a true beltway should be constructed further west in Roane and Anderson counties.

But the Tennessee Department of Transportation countered that a more westerly route wasn't economically feasible because of the number of waterways along that path.

TDOT Commissioner Gerald Nicely didn't initiate the project, but he opted to proceed with it after a transportation study. To soften the impact, Nicely promised to involve the public and apply Context Sensitive Solutions to the beltway.

Context Sensitive Solutions addresses safety and mobility and the preservation of scenic, aesthetic, historic, environmental and other community values when designing a highway. While new to Tennessee, the concept has been used by several other states.

The Knoxville Regional Transportation Planning Organization appointed a team of 19 people representing communities, local governments, transportation agencies and economic interests. Those representatives were also approved by TDOT.

The resource team has been educated about CSS by Palmer Engineering in six meetings since April. Palmer Engineering is a Kentucky firm that has applied the CSS concept to a project in that state.

Palmer Engineering has sent a newsletter about the parkway project to 2,700 residents that may potentially be impacted by the route.

David Lindeman, vice president of Palmer Engineering, said 1,800 households lie in the parkway's study corridor. The newsletter and other updates are available online at www.parkway.com.

One change already made by the resource team is to name the road a parkway instead of a beltway, Lindeman said.

"They wanted the name to reflect more closely what they envision for the project," he said.

"They wanted something a bit softer, that blends better with the existing topography. They want the project to appear more like a park-like setting."

There has even been discussion among the resource team of building a greenway along the parkway, Shaw said.

But the real work of the resource team to decide the route of the parkway won't begin until after public input. During the upcoming public meetings, Lindeman said, people are expected to provide details and perspectives they think are important to the design.

It might be as simple as noting a family cemetery within the 1,000-foot wide study corridor or pointing out a sinkhole. Or it might be as drastic as expressing an opinion about interchanges along the route.

"That's one of the questions we're going to put to the public - where they would like to see the interchanges and why or why not," Lindeman said.

Several members of the resource team said they are opposed to any interchanges between Lenoir City and Norris.

"I want to see it move traffic from I-75, across the counties and onto the interstate," said Roland Terrell, who represents the Solway community on the resource team.

"We don't have a problem with I-40 traffic now in Solway, but they're going to give us that problem if they put interchanges on the beltway."

Terrell said impacted residents "are still trying their best to swallow the beltway," but he thinks the public meetings are an honest attempt by TDOT to involve the public.

Edgar Faust, who represents the Hardin Valley community, said everybody in the valley will be impacted by the parkway.

"But whether you're for it or against it, that has nothing to do with the context sensitive team," Faust said. "It appears that TDOT has genuinely been trying to make the process work."

Although a member of the resource team, Shaw also is active in Citizens Against the Beltway Orange Location, a group formed in 1997 to oppose the road.

"We're opposed, but we're participating in the process," Shaw said. "If the road gets built, I'd like to think we had a hand in making it as palatable as possible to the communities it goes through."

Shaw noted that motorists and residents today realize road planners in the 1950s made a mistake routing interstates through the middle of cities. The resource team is tasked with selecting a route and design that posterity will judge.

"I'd like to think that they'll look back and think we made the right decisions," he said.

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