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Moving the masses

Challenge is to make Knoxville Parkway a good neighbor

By **GERALD NICELY**
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East Tennesseans are all too familiar with traffic congestion and the negative impact it creates on their lives. Congestion also negatively affects our environment by increasing emissions and wasting fuel. Vehicles in stop-and-go traffic emit more pollutants — particularly carbon monoxide and volatile organic compounds.

According to the U.S. House Committee of Transportation and Infrastructure, increased investment in transportation infrastructure has far-reaching impacts on the quality of life in our communities, our nation's economy and our competitiveness in the world marketplace. Each day, every American and every business will benefit from such investment by experiencing shortened travel times, increased productivity, improved safety, and reduced congestion-related emissions.

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The Knoxville Parkway will help alleviate congestion in West Knoxville and will reduce the effects of slow-moving traffic on the environment. The Papermill Drive interchange carries 152,000 vehicles every day. That number is expected to rise. The cost of congestion to Knoxville motorists equals millions of dollars in terms of wasted time and fuel. And, most importantly, reducing congestion would save lives and property damage by reducing the number of bottleneck crashes and secondary accidents. When the Knoxville Parkway opens, it is estimated that as many as 30,850 vehicles a day would use the route.

Here is how the project started. What was originally called the Knoxville Northern Bypass began in 1971 when the East Tennessee Development District proposed a western regional bypass for Knoxville. Twenty-three years later, more serious discussions began when the ETDD and the Knoxville-Knox County Metropolitan Planning Organization asked the Tennessee Department of Transportation to conduct a study of the proposed beltway. Two alternates emerged from the study, routes labeled as Orange and Blue.

In 1997, TDOT conducted five public meetings to gather input on the Blue and Orange routes. As a result of those meetings, the Blue Route was revised to avoid the Department of Energy's Oak Ridge Reservation due to potential impacts to buried hazardous material and historic properties.

A third route was added — a modified route using the existing Pellissippi Parkway called the Green Route. After the draft environmental impact study was returned by the Federal Highway Administration, five additional public hearings were held in early 2002.

On July 31, 2002, TDOT announced that it would proceed with the Orange Route. Soon after Gov. Phil Bredesen took office, I, as newly appointed TDOT commissioner, asked the University of Tennessee's Center for Transportation

Research to take a closer look at the Knoxville Beltway plan and re-evaluate the process that was used to create the proposal.

After that review was concluded and after many consultations and careful consideration, the decision was made to proceed with a modified version of the Orange Route on Nov. 10, 2003.

After making that decision, the department began implementing a process called context sensitive solutions, a new approach to transportation project development that brings citizens and stakeholders into the design process before major decisions are made; it is also known as community sensitive design. A 19-member community team was formed to begin work on determining how CSS could be best applied to the project. One of the first things the team did was change the name from the Knoxville Beltway to the Knoxville Parkway to reflect their vision for the project.

The team has some exciting work ahead as members decide how this project will fit into the community. Retaining walls, bridges and sound walls can be shaped and colored to fit into the natural environment. Enhancements can add a visual impact to the project, leaving a positive impression on visitors and daily users. Currently the community team and its subcommittees are busy looking at interchanges, environmental stewardship needs and future land-use possibilities.

Their next series of public workshops will be in the spring and will give citizens an opportunity to see and comment on the teams' work. As their work continues into next year, they will be recommending where the center line falls within the 1,000-foot study corridor, the placement of interchanges and the look and feel of the entire project. The team will submit its final recommendation in the fall of 2005.

The parkway resource team has a lot of work to do before submitting a final recommendation next fall. It is my hope and expectation that, by working together, we can be good stewards of the environment, and we can design and construct a safe, aesthetically pleasing and useful road project that can be a source of pride for the entire region.

Gerald Nicely is commissioner of the Tennessee Department of Transportation.

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