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Pollution problems plague priority road projects

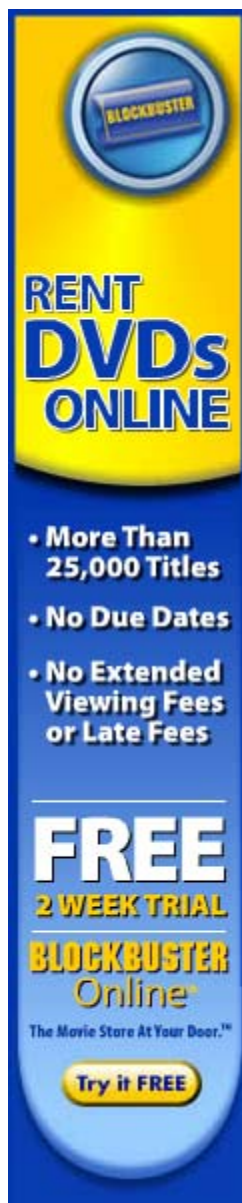
By **DON JACOBS**, jacobs@knew.com

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State and local elected officials met Tuesday with transportation planners to review priority road projects, but the specter of air pollution standards looms as a potential spoiler to future construction plans.

Big rigs and cars are major contributors to air pollution, so much so that state officials are considering speed restrictions on trucks.

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Blockbuster Online advertisement featuring a yellow and blue design. At the top is a circular logo with the word 'BLOCKBUSTER' in a blue banner. Below it, the text 'RENT DVDs ONLINE' is written in large, bold, blue letters. A list of benefits follows: '• More Than 25,000 Titles', '• No Due Dates', and '• No Extended Viewing Fees or Late Fees'. Below this, 'FREE 2 WEEK TRIAL' is written in large, bold, white letters on a blue background. Underneath, 'BLOCKBUSTER Online' is written in blue and white, with the tagline 'The Movie Store At Your Door.™' in small text. At the bottom, a yellow button with a blue border says 'Try it FREE'.

Each day 28 million vehicle miles are logged in the seven-county area designated by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency as non-attainment areas. Those counties are Knox, Anderson, Blount, Jefferson, Loudon, Sevier and Cocke.

"There's a lot of emissions associated with that," said Jeff Welch, executive director of the Knoxville Regional Transportation Planning Organization, or TPO.

Welch noted that with Virginia transportation officials examining plans to build a special commercial truck lane on Interstate 81, East Tennessee might have a continuous stream of big rigs flowing into the area.

"We need to work with not only the seven-county area, but the Tennessee Department of Transportation also to address these multistate decisions," Welch said.

Ed Cole, chief of environment and planning with TDOT, said TDOT Commissioner Gerald Nicely is expected to announce at the first of the year if speed restrictions will be placed on commercial trucks in non-attainment regions across the state.

"We were asked to examine the possibility of reducing the speed limits for trucks and to limit, when feasible, the trucks to certain lanes in areas with three lanes on the interstates," Cole said.

The speed of trucks, he said, could be limited to 55 mph.

The EPA has designated the Knox area, Hamilton County, Memphis and the Nashville area as failing to meeting air pollution standards. Federal regulations allow authorities to withhold road construction funding to non-attainment areas.

Welch reviewed with elected officials from Knox, Loudon, Blount and Sevier counties the 13 priority projects established by the Knoxville Regional TPO. The list is the same as last year and represents an estimated \$600 million in construction, Welch said.

First on the list is the widening of Interstate 40 downtown, set to begin in 2006.

State Sen. Raymond Finney, R-Blount and Sevier counties, said upgrading Alcoa Highway is a major concern. Improving Alcoa Highway from Hunt Road in Alcoa to Cherokee Trail in Knox County is second on the priority road list.

Finney also wants to see Blount County retrieve more than 25 percent of the state and federal fuel taxes currently being returned for road construction.

State Sen. Jamie Hagood, R-Knoxville, said improvements to Emory Road, Chapman Highway, Alcoa Highway and widening downtown I-40 are her priorities. All are on the TPO's priority list of 13 projects, with the exception of Chapman Highway.

State Rep. Doug Overbey, who represents the 20th District in Blount County, said his main interests are the Alcoa Parkway and the Pellissippi Parkway extension. The extension is No. 5 on the TPO priority list.

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