

It's all in the presentation

As I looked at the maps pasted across the newsroom office walls, I wondered just where in the heck is this proposed new I-475 bypass going to be located. The sheets of paper were taped together depicting an aerial view of zigzagging lines representing a four-lane highway connecting Interstate 75/40 to I-75 just east of Clinton.

Claxton residents had an opportunity to view maps of this futuristic project at a workshop recently. It appears the route would run down Hardin Valley, cross Pellissippi Parkway near the Oak Ridge Highway and cross Clinton Highway near Bull Run Creek. It would run roughly parallel to the Oak Ridge Turnpike on the east side of the Clinch River.

The proposed highway, known as the "Orange Route," is one of three options that would give I-75 drivers an alternate route, allowing them to bypass Knoxville and the Interstate 40/75 corridor - which everyone knows is heavily traveled by trucks.

It was no surprise that this informational workshop attracted approximately 300 residents, several from Claxton. And while many objected to the proposal outright, some actually had a favorable reaction. "I think it's needed," one resident commented, but added, "I hope they don't take my land."

Another person believes more interchanges should be included. "If the road's going to come through and cross the properties, we ought to have an interchange to use the road," this person said.

Could these be the same people that recently marched to a meeting armed with pitchforks and torches demanding the city of Oak Ridge stay on their side of the Clinch River? Oak Ridge City Manager Jim O'Connor fled before being tarred and feathered, and the ashes are still smoldering after being burned in effigy in Claxton. And you thought the additional smoke from the plant was for additional power production.

I tried to understand why the Claxton mob, I mean residents, were so viciously opposed to Oak Ridge annexing Bull Run when their reactions were mixed and somewhat subdued to the proposal of a highway slicing through their backyards. What gives?

Perhaps the fumes from Bull Run have finally taken their toll. Or maybe they think the proposed I-475 Parkway will be a "toll" road offering them residuals based on usage?

And then it finally hit me. It's all in the presentation.

First you designate it a parkway, not a highway. Doesn't parkway sound so Š so Š green and lush? One can envision trees and flowering daffodils growing along the roadside. Or better yet, planter boxes in the median with marigolds or geraniums for some seasonal color. That sounds nice.

Like all clever marketing techniques you need to identify with your local audience. Do you think it was a coincidence the best of the three proposed routes is the "Orange Route?" Let's face it, everyone wants to side with a winner. Who could argue against UT orange?

And, finally, call it a workshop and have plenty of maps available.

I couldn't understand why our Claxton neighbors didn't see through this clever marketing scheme to take their property. Maybe they were fooled by the fancy maps or riveted to the large sums of money the state said the project would cost. The 26.5-mile parkway could cost \$500 million to \$600 million to build.

Here again, I ask, why do they accept the state taking their property for a highway, oops, I mean parkway, while drafting a local militia to defend against the annexation of a power plant? Could it be they know which of the two could actually become reality?

We're still uncertain just where annexation is these days. When Mayor David Bradshaw and County Mayor Rex Lynch are finished playing patty-cake behind the scenes perhaps we'll learn if the steam plant will remain in Oak Ridge's long-range growth plan or simply disappear like a puff of smoke. I guess we'll know after the election.

State highway construction is treated like an entitlement program in Tennessee. Take the construction work (if that's what it's called) at the Papermill Road exit on I-40 for example. Construction jobs will be passed down for generations, and I'm convinced we'll never see it completed during our lifetime.

Knowing this, Claxton residents can be certain the parkway will never see the light of day. But they can never be so sure about Oak Ridge's annexation of Bull Run and their paranoid fears of becoming Oak Ridgers.

So before Oak Ridge cedes its right to annex beyond Bull Run, it might consider the benefits of annexing property up to and including any proposed interchanges built on any future "parkway."

We could market this new expansion proposal as the "Claxton Greenbelt" or better yet the "Orange Beltway." Don't forget, when in Claxton, call it a workshop and use some nifty maps.

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