

Road team's last lap

During the last two years, a group helping to design a new Knoxville bypass highway has spent many hours deciding what would be the best route for the new roadway and determining how many interchanges to include and where.

On Wednesday morning, the group is scheduled to meet for a few more hours in what should be their final meeting - at least for now.

The group, the Knoxville Regional Parkway Design Resource Team, is scheduled to meet 9 a.m. Wednesday in the National Transportation Research Center, off Hardin Valley Road near Pellissippi Parkway. The 18-member team is scheduled to finish work on their recommendation report, which includes the proposed route alignment and two interchanges: one at Pellissippi Parkway and the other at Clinton Highway.

The parkway would connect Interstate 75 in Loudon County to I-75 in Anderson County. A few miles from Oak Ridge, it would run down Hardin Valley, cross Pellissippi Parkway near Oak Ridge Highway and cross Clinton Highway near Bull Run Creek.

The team also met on March 29 to work on the report, but ran out of time to finish their meeting agenda.

There are some differences of opinion among team members about whether a potential interchange at Raccoon Valley Road deserves further study, and a few team members have said they might not sign the final report, said David Lindeman, vice president of Palmer Engineering, of Winchester, Ky., a project consultant.

The recommendation report is supposed to go to Tennessee Department of Transportation officials April 12.

Two of those who said they might not sign the report said they would prefer the parkway be built on a different route, Lindeman said. But that was not the task the team was given in 2004, he said.

Instead, they were asked to design a minimum 300-foot parkway right-of-way within a 1,000-foot corridor and determine where interchanges should be located.

Five team members signed the report on March 29, and others said they will sign it after requested changes are made, Lindeman said.

He said the report does not require any signatures.

"But, we prefer that the members agree, and sign off," Lindeman said.

Lindeman said most of what is in the recommendation report has been reached by consensus.

Team members and officials also expect a minority report to be issued.

Sharon Todd, a Claxton resident who is on the design resource team, said she is one of those who plan to sign the recommendation report - as long as suggested revisions have been made.

Though she was initially opposed to the new road project, Todd said she had to put some personal views aside to do "what is best for the community."

She said most Claxton residents, many of whom were also initially opposed to the parkway, are ready to move on.

"Most of them would like to get on with their lives," Todd said. "They've accepted it."

Greg Fay, Clinton Utilities Board general manager and also a design resource team member, said he also intends to sign the recommendation report.

"It represents over two years of work that has encompassed hundreds of hours, and I think it is exactly what TDOT requested us to do ... to build the best possible parkway within the parameters," Fay said.

Fay is one of those who would have liked further study on a possible Raccoon Valley Road interchange. He said there was a lack of consensus on the interchange, both on the design resource team and in the community.

"I think we had sufficient division on the issue that it deserves greater study," he said. "I think we have moved too quickly."

Officials say the four-lane divided parkway, also referred to as State Route 475 and the Orange Route, would allow a bypass around west Knoxville, decreasing congestion and reducing travel time.

The 26.5-mile parkway could cost \$500 million to \$600 million to build, officials say, but construction funding is not yet available.

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