

November 10, 2003

TDOT Announces Decision on Knoxville Beltway Project

Nashville, Tennessee - The Tennessee Department of Transportation (TDOT) announced today that it would build a modified version of the proposed State Route 475/Knoxville Beltway known as the Orange Route. TDOT Commissioner Gerald Nicely made the announcement during a news conference at the department's Region One Headquarters in Knoxville.

"We are going to build the Beltway, but we are going to evaluate possible modifications to the corridor known as the Orange Route," Nicely said. "After a great deal of study, we have determined that a modified version of the Orange Route will provide the greatest traffic benefit. It will also offer a shorter travel route, with fewer noise impacts—all of which correlate directly with the Knoxville Long Range Plan."

The project involves the construction of a new, access-controlled, divided highway connecting Interstate 75 (I-75) southwest of Knoxville with I-75 north of the city, thereby providing a bypass route around the northwest side of the Knoxville metropolitan area.

Nicely's announcement comes after a detailed review by the University of Tennessee Center for Transportation Research of 15 proposed TDOT projects across the state. Nicely requested the study last spring after taking over as the head of TDOT, and immediately stopped all work or planning being done on the controversial projects that represented more than a billion dollars in road construction work. Governor Phil Bredesen and Commissioner Nicely targeted the 15 projects based largely on comments the Governor received during the 2002 campaign.

The independent UT study involved a series of "Listening Sessions" conducted around the state. It focused on collecting information from citizens, communities, city planners and government officials about how the projects were deemed necessary in the first place. The second study goal was to provide input for TDOT to identify areas for the improvement of its highway planning, business and communications practices.

Regarding the Knoxville Beltway Orange Route, the UT review team recommended considering some modifications that would include a more interactive process with the community.

"All prior assumptions which brought the Orange Route to this stage should be evaluated in more detail with appropriate regional and local planning groups and the community," said Dr. Stephen Richards, director of the UT Center for Transportation Research. "This process may result in a refinement of the alignment which best meets community needs while being sensitive to project impacts. Innovative design and construction procedures could be incorporated into the next stages to mitigate adverse effects of the project."

TDOT's Chief of Environment and Planning, Ed Cole, explained what steps the department would be taking next. "An analysis of the route will be undertaken with involvement by local officials and citizens. It will include updated traffic estimates, possible consideration of alterations in final route alignment, locations of interchanges, environmental impacts, traffic patterns and land use patterns along the corridor," Cole said.

Cole also said the TDOT Project Management Office, in coordination with the Planning, Environmental Planning and Permits, Design and Community Relations Divisions, will work with the Knoxville Transportation Planning Organization, the City of Knoxville, and Knox County to create a Context Sensitive Solutions Resource team to guide the review process.

"They will take into account a variety of factors that go beyond the pavement to include community, environmental and aesthetic considerations in addition to prioritizing traffic and safety needs," added Cole.

*A synopsis of the Knoxville Beltway decision is attached. This news release and related documents are available on the TDOT web site at www.tennessee.gov/tdot.

Project Reviewed: State Route 475 Knoxville Beltway

1) Project Description: This project involves the construction of a new, access-controlled, divided highway connecting Interstate 75 (I-75) southwest of Knoxville, Tennessee, with I-75 north of the city, thereby providing a bypass route around the northwest side of the Knoxville metropolitan area. The project begins on I-75 near Lenoir City 5.8 miles southwest of the merging of I-40 and I-75. It ends on I-75 north of Knoxville three miles north of the existing I-75 interchange at State Route 61 (SR 61) near Norris. The roadway is functionally classified as a principal arterial and is proposed to be included in the National Highway System.

Of the three alternative alignments for SR 475 evaluated during the preparation of a Draft Environmental Impact Statement, TDOT selected the Orange Route in August 2002. This alignment is a combination of existing right-of-way and new right-of-way. Under the proposed SR 475 project, the first section on the west would include widening I-75 to three lanes in each direction. The middle section of SR 475 is on new location and approximately 24.4 miles. The final section of the Orange Route coincides with I-75 for a distance of approximately 6.4 miles to its eastern terminus. Unlike the other I-75 portion of the Orange Route, there are no plans to widen this section of I-75 to six lanes. The total length of the Orange Route from its western terminus to its eastern terminus is 36.5 miles including the two I-75 sections.

State Route 475 would be access-controlled with seven (7) interchanges. There are 17 grade overpasses at other selected intersecting roadways. However, six intersecting roads would be closed with frontage roads or service drives provided where required to maintain access to existing development.

2) UT Findings: If TDOT decides to continue moving ahead with the Orange Route, the state should consider a more interactive process with the community. All prior assumptions which brought the Orange Route to this stage should be evaluated in more detail with appropriate regional and local planning groups, and the community. This process may result in a refinement of the alignment including location and number of interchanges, which best meets community needs while being sensitive to project impacts.

Should TDOT elect to revisit alternatives (other than the Orange Route) or develop new alternatives, the department should consider the same interactive process with the community described above.

As TDOT designs the refined alternative, processes that obtain meaningful public input from individuals, citizen groups, and local governments should be used. Innovative design and construction procedures could be incorporated into the next stages of the project to mitigate as much as possible any adverse effects of the project.

3) TDOT Review: The Evaluation Team recommends the department proceed with the "Orange Route" alternative. The department should proceed by engaging all stakeholders, local and state elected officials, community representatives and planning organizations, including the Knoxville Transportation Planning Organization (TPO) with the goal of finding the best solution. Initial topics to be addressed include the fine-tuning of route alignment, location of interchanges, traffic analysis and land use.

In addition, the evaluation team recommends continuing public involvement through the development and construction stages of the project. The public involvement should be held with community and special interest groups. Once the project development process advances, meetings should be held in each individual community to mitigate any "potential impact" issues identified.

Implement a Context Sensitive Solution process to address the concerns of groups and individuals including all stakeholders, but not limited to, landowners, homeowners and facility users. These context sensitive solution principles should include planning, environmental, design, construction, maintenance and operation of the facility. Considering this facility is a high-speed freeway, the team also recommends appropriate design standards be maintained.

4) Decision: Proceed with significant modifications. Proceed with Knoxville Beltway project and evaluate possible modifications to the "Orange Route" alternative. In order to accomplish this, an analysis of this alternative will be undertaken with involvement by local officials (through the Knoxville

Transportation Planning Organization (TPO)) citizens, and TDOT staff. This analysis will include updated traffic estimates, possible consideration of alterations in final route alignment, locations of interchanges, environmental impacts, traffic patterns and land use patterns along the corridor. A formal Context Sensitive Solutions process will be employed as the means to carry this effort forward. In order to assure maximum public review, any revised preferred alternative alignment for this project will be made a supplement to the current Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) and opened for public comment.

5) Next Steps:

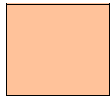
The Knoxville TPO will be informed in writing of this decision. This will take place immediately.

The TDOT Project Management Office, in coordination with the Planning, Environmental Planning and Permits, Design and Community Relations Divisions, will work with the Knoxville TPO, the City of Knoxville and Knox County to create a Context Sensitive Solutions Resource Team to guide the review process. The Resource Team will be established within 90 days.

Working with the Context Sensitive Solutions process and the Resource Team, TDOT's Project Management Team will coordinate the development of final alignment and design features for the Knoxville Beltway. The final alignment will be determined within 12-18 months from the establishment of the Resource Team.

The TDOT Environmental Planning & Permits Division will proceed with development of a supplement to the existing DEIS. The supplement will include updated traffic estimates, be coordinated with the Knoxville TPO, and include the alignment and design outcomes of the Context Sensitive Solutions process. This process will begin concurrently with the start of the Context Sensitive Solutions process and be completed 6 months following completion of this process.

Map of Proposed SR 475 (the Knoxville Beltway) in Knox County



Project Area

