

Pellissippi Parkway Extension

Residents speak out as TDOT listens up

By Lance Coleman

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More than 300 showed Tuesday night, July 20, to hear about the latest installment in the Pellissippi Parkway Extension saga. The Tennessee Department of Transportation has released a Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) regarding completing the Extension.

The majority of folks who spoke came out against \$105 million alternatives A and C that would construct routes cutting across 4 miles of mainly farmland between East Lamar Alexander Parkway and East Broadway Avenue. Some said the \$60 million alternative D to improve existing roads such as Sam Houston School House, Peppermint, Hitch and Helton roads was the way to go. Still others said the Tennessee Department of Transportation should use Alternative B, save the money and not build anything.

The reason the Draft Environmental Impact Statement is important is because federal regulations stipulate no project receiving federal funding can proceed without this requirement being completed.

While many in the audience wore green stickers indicating their support for the Parkway Extension, the citizens who came to microphone set up on one side of the packed auditorium at Heritage High School all expressed opposition to the project. Public comments were made from about 5:30 to 7:30.

Near the beginning of the meeting, former Maryville police chief Terry Nichols was the sole person to speak out in favor of completing the extension. "I own property in the path," Nichols said. "It's a great idea and a long time coming. Blount County needs help with infrastructure. The no-build is not an option. Let's build this thing. It's time to do it," he said to a loud applause.

The other speakers disagreed and one by one stood to speak at the microphone.

Commissioner Bob Proffitt said the extension is a Maryville bypass. "It will save just 11 minutes time and is not worthy of that much expense," he said.

Susan Keller said either road would cut through farmland her family has owned for six generations. "Is the road only vital because it comes through my yard and not yours?" she said. "Is it worth the price?"

Jay Clark said he was certain some infrastructure improvements needed to be built but building the extension appears to be overkill just so people can have a quicker commute. "If you want a closer drive to Knoxville, I'd suggest moving closer," he said.

Tom Robbins asked if the state was going to give the partners in the Pellissippi Place development fair market price for the land they will use to build the extension through that development. "Are you going to give \$300,000 an acre to go through the R and D park that is not even close to being operational?" he asked.

Nina Gregg with Citizens Against the Pellissippi Parkway Extension said the extension would not solve problems of traffic congestion. The areas where it would be built are in the urban growth boundary and would be annexed by Maryville or Alcoa, she said, leaving little tax revenues for the county coffers.

Gregg also challenged the study's assertion that more money will be generated from sales tax because more residents will live in the area. Gregg said the extension would only make it easier for those residents to shop in Knox County.

"You have to look at all the pieces of the puzzle," Gregg said. "We don't want to be back here in 10 years looking at a tax increase or dealing with schools not being able to buy books. We're looking to our elected leaders to say that they've looked at the alternatives and it's not going to be good for the citizens," she said. "We're looking for leadership."

When asked if Gregg would favor the Alternative D and improve existing roads, she said that would not solve the problems at hand. "We need a new approach," she said.

Greg McClain, city manager for the City of Maryville, said after the meeting that the city is sensitive to the public's concerns.

"When it comes to traffic, local roads do need to be improved," McClain said. "We're not saying Pellissippi solves all the road issues. Roads need to be improved, but that does not negate the need for the Pellissippi extension."

Bryan Daniels, interim president and CEO of the Blount Chamber Partnership, said the original route of the project is within the urban growth boundaries of Maryville and Alcoa. This would mitigate issues because of those city's planning and zoning regulations.

Daniels said the best case scenario is for the extension to be built as soon as possible. The benefits would include increased sales tax revenues for cities and counties. The chamber however doesn't want to harm the environment on its way to improving the economy, he said. "We are believers that you encourage growth by proper planning."

Project planner Nancy Skinner said the purpose of the project was to enhance the regional transportation system links in north Blount County, east of Alcoa and Maryville; improve mobility; enhance roadway safety on the existing roads; achieve acceptable traffic flows on the new routes; and not adversely affect traffic flows on existing networks.

The alternatives evaluated by TDOT include Alternative B: the No-Build Alternative which would not extend Pellissippi Parkway east beyond Old Knoxville Highway.

Alternatives A and C would extend the parkway as a new four-lane divided highway with interchanges at old Knoxville Highway, Sevierville Road and East Lamar Alexander Parkway. Alternative A would run 4.38 miles long while Alternative C would be 4.68 miles long.

Alternative D would upgrade Sam Houston School Road as well as Peppermint, Hutton and Helton roads.

According to the TDOT draft environmental impact statement, the environmental effects of the four alternatives are as follows:

The No-Build Alternative B would not improve the regional transportation system, nor provide travel options to the existing roadway network in Blount County. It wouldn't be consistent with local and regional plans, and it wouldn't address traffic congestion within the existing local transportation network.

The benefits of the "Build" alternatives include completion of Pellissippi Parkway, either by using Alternatives A or C; reducing potential for crashes in the Maryville core area by allowing through traffic to bypass the city core; contributing to the implementation of local and regional community and transportation plans and creation of jobs related to transportation.

The primary adverse impact of the Build alternatives would include relocating residents and businesses, acquiring active farmland, impacting archaeological sites, increased noise that will impact nearby residences, streams, wetlands and floodplains impacted and temporary construction impacts.

"You would have increased noise you don't have today," Skinner said.

Skinner said while the no-build alternative would keep travel time on the east side of the county from East Lamar Alexander to Alcoa Highway at 19 minutes over 11 miles, Alternatives A and C would cut travel time to 8 minutes over 7 miles. Alternative D travel time is 8 miles in 11 minutes.

According to the Draft Environmental Impact Statement, the next steps in the process will entail state officials analyzing and addressing public and agency comments, selecting a preferred alternative, conducting any additional technical studies to resolve issues, finalizing mitigation measures and preparing final environment documents and publicizing the availability of final environmental impact document.

"In the fall of 2011, we should have the director's decision," Skinner said.

History of the Pellissippi Parkway

According to the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS), Pellissippi Parkway, designated as I-140, between Interstate 40 and Old Knoxville Highway was designed and built in four sections between 1987 and 2005. The section between Northshore Drive in Knox County and Alcoa Highway in Blount County was completed in 1992.

The next section, extending the original Pellissippi Parkway to Northshore Drive with a new interchange at I-40/I-75, opened in 1997. The section between Alcoa Highway and Cusick Road

opened in 2003, and the section between Cusick Road and Old Knoxville Highway opened in late 2005. The section of Pellissippi Parkway between Old Knoxville Highway and East Lamar Alexander Parkway is the remaining undeveloped portion of the parkway.

In January 1999, TDOT initiated a NEPA-level Environmental Assessment (EA) to evaluate the effects of alternatives for the project. The FHWA approved the EA in October 2001, and TDOT held a public hearing in November 2001. In April 2002, the FHWA issued a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI), and property acquisition was to have begun in June 2002.

In June 2002, the Citizens Against the Pellissippi Parkway Extension (CAPPE) filed suit against the USDOT, FHWA, and TDOT in the US District Court for the Middle District of Tennessee. The lawsuit alleged that the FHWA should have prepared an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) in compliance with NEPA, and that the FHWA failed to document properly the decision not to prepare an EIS.

In July 2002, the District Court imposed a preliminary injunction on planning, financing, contracting, land acquisition, and construction of the project. The FHWA then withdrew the FONSI and sought a voluntary remand to allow the agency to reconsider its decision, but the District Court denied that motion.

Following an appeal by the FHWA, in August 2004, the District Court issued an order modifying its previous injunction. That order allowed the FHWA and TDOT to reconsider and reissue the relevant environmental documents.

In September 2004, TDOT announced that the next phase of development for the proposed Pellissippi Parkway Extension project would be the preparation of an EIS.

Public hearings have been held on the project in June of 2006, October of 2007, February of 2008 and Tuesday's meeting, July of 2010.

Residents can also mail their comments, postmarked by Aug. 30, to Project Comments: Pellissippi Parkway Extension, Tennessee Department of Transportation, 505 Deaderick St. Suite 700, James K. Polk Building, Nashville, Tenn., 37243-0332.

