

# Funds Sought To Bring Henderson Loop 571 Full Circle

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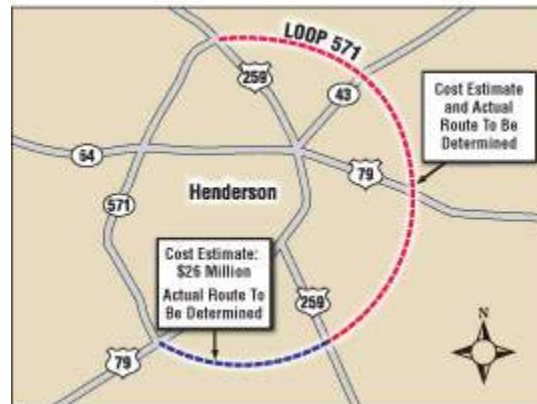
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HENDERSON -- Efforts are under way to arrange a multimillion dollar funding package for the extension of Loop 571 around the city of Henderson.

A decision on state funding for the project is expected in early to mid-spring, and construction would start only if funding is nailed down, said John Cloutier, who represents Rusk County on the North East Texas Regional Mobility Authority's board of directors.

The first segment of the loop was started in 1991 and completed in 1996. It stretches about 5 miles from U.S. Highway 259 north around the west end of Henderson to U.S. Highway 79 South, which is about 35 to 40 percent -- a little more than a third -- of a planned circle around Henderson.

Depending on how lines are drawn, finishing the loop would involve constructing another 12 miles of roadway.



Approximately half of the project would consist of an extension from U.S. 79 to U.S. 259 at a cost "somewhere in the neighborhood of \$26 million," Cloutier said.

Originally, supporters of the loop extension were not going to pursue the last segment from U.S. 259 South to U.S. 259 North to finish the loop, but came to realize funding likely to become available soon may be the last for awhile.

Building the next phase from U.S. 79 to U.S. 259 South would "be good," Cloutier said, but, he added, "it would be great to construct the whole thing. To solve our problems in more of a long-term fashion, I think it would be very prudent for us to pursue the entire (project), so we are going to put together a price for that."

The need for the loop extension is accentuated, Cloutier said, by construction of a \$22 million, five-grade school on U.S. 259 South, scheduled to open in August, and by convergence of several highways in a traffic star on the east side of the City of Henderson, reputedly the third most-congested intersection in East Texas.

According to Cloutier, Henderson/Rusk County leaders are working with the Regional Mobility Authority trying to get together a package for a pass-through financing application to the state for the loop.

"We want our regional partners to help us bring this project to the forefront," Cloutier said.

Texas Transportation Commission Chairwoman Deirdre Delisi reportedly intends to authorize release of \$1.5 billion of a \$5 billion bond issue approved by voters to address projects on the books that have been waiting for pass-through replenishment funds. She has been instrumental in opening eyes around the state to the need to find a rural solution to traffic problems, Cloutier said.

Rusk County Commissioners Court originally set aside in an infrastructure fund \$400,000 in last year's budget and a little more than \$400,000 in this year's budget, making available a total of roughly \$800,000 that has not been spent.

In applying for state funding, some of the local funds will have to be used upfront to pay professional firms to print the application and draw maps for the project.

Cloutier plans to ask commissioners shortly to move some of the money from the county's infrastructure fund to the Regional Mobility Authority.

"RMA can then represent Rusk County with that money to try to get the pass-through funding application approved," Cloutier said. "The RMA is mandated by law to allocate its fund where they are produced, so the RMA is a wonderful conduit for us as a community to partner with to help marshal resources."

Cloutier added, "We want to use our regional partners to help us bring this project to the forefront. We want to use the revenues we've already set aside to prove to the state we're more than ready and more than behind this project, and hopefully they'll free up some more pass-through funds."

Rusk/Henderson leaders have not had any success in getting the project on the state rural infrastructure plan, since the county is in a district overloaded with projects, Cloutier said, "Our projects are in competition with communities of the size of Longview and Tyler," he added.

"The RMA is the best thing to come out of the Legislature in the last 10 years to give us an opportunity to have a seat at the table and bring our projects and make our case to other people in the region so that the people we formerly were pitted against are allies with us," Cloutier said.

"We are trying to bring the state as a partner to the table for funding. We are going to apply for full reimbursement through pass-through finance on that road because we've done a lot of the ground work and we've done everything the state has asked us to do for the last five years to bring this project to fruition."

Although the entire remaining loop technically lies in the county, the city would benefit from completion of construction from the standpoints of traffic congestion and economic development.

Consequently, "We're asking the mayor and council to keep their eye on the ball and come to the table with resources when they become available," Cloutier said.

Rusk County leaders have been "very present" at the state capital last fall and this winter in promoting the loop project.

"I've met with many, many legislators and many, many different representatives and the Texas Department of Transportation commissioner, the railroad commissioner we've met with just about everybody, so they are aware that we exist and they know that we have needs and they've been very responsive," Cloutier said.