

Rusk transportation officials making plans to extend Loop 571

By Jamaal E. O'Neal, Longview News Journal

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Some Rusk County transportation officials want to bring Loop 571 full circle.

The possibility of more state funding might allow them to do that, a Rusk County transportation official said Friday.

The original \$10 million plan called for extending the loop three miles southeast, from U.S. 79 to U.S. 259 south of Henderson. Area leaders now want the loop to continue north from U.S. 79, back to U.S. 259 on the northern edge of Henderson.

John Cloutier, Rusk County's representative on the Northeast Texas Regional Mobility Authority Board, said area officials are working with the RMA for pass-through financing from the state to help with some of the loop's construction costs. The funding would provide reimbursement to Henderson and Rusk County from the Texas Department of Transportation, Cloutier said.

Cloutier said officials decided to move forward with plans to fully extend the loop, after TxDOT Chairwoman Deirdre Delisi announced plans to possibly release \$1.5 billion of a \$5 billion voter-approved bond for backlogged road projects.

"Right now we're in the planning stages and waiting on the state to make a move," Cloutier said. "We're going to continue to work with engineers on the right of ways and layout. We estimate it would cost about \$26 million to complete the 12-mile-long project."

Cloutier said officials are using a portion of the county's \$800,000 Loop 571 fund to complete the engineering plans. He said he will present Rusk County commissioners with an interlocal agreement between the county and RMA in February.

"We think it's a worthwhile project and will help Henderson and industry in Rusk County," Cloutier said.

According to TxDOT, Loop 571 carries 5,000 cars a day. About 28,000 cars a day travel through Henderson from U.S. 259 and U.S. 79 through Henderson. In 2000, 21,000 cars passed through town daily, TxDOT records show.

Cloutier said that with a loop extension, Nacogdoches, Lufkin and Houston traffic might opt to take the loop rather than drive through the city.

"Henderson is in one of many congested areas in all of East Texas," Cloutier said. "Without building the loop it's only going to get worse. I think it's important that we move forward with fully extending the loop to circle Henderson."