

Smith County Commissioners Court Meeting

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The Smith County Commissioners Court received transportation reports regarding mobility needs and ongoing projects from three area agencies Monday during their regular meeting.

Tab Beall of the North East Texas Regional Mobility Authority, and Jamal Moharer from the Smith County Transportation Advisory Committee (STAC) and East Texas Transportation Coordination Steering Committee presented reports regarding area mobility initiatives in Smith County.

Beall reported that funding for Segment 5 of Loop 49 was available and the project can get under way. The completion of Segment 5 would connect State Highways 110 and 155, creating 9 miles of roadway.

The Texas Transportation Commission approved \$20 million in funding for the Loop 49 project from Proposition 14 bonds approved by voters in 2003.

He said NET RMA is working diligently to prepare plans so other segments of the project would be eligible for federal funding that might be available as part of President Barack Obama's stimulus package.

If that funding is secured, Beall said, the Loop 49 project would be ready to extend westward to State Highway 31.

"One of our strengths is our ability to work with the different local entities, commissioners court, the city and chambers of commerce and others to make sure we secure the transportation requirements for the region," Beall said. "We all benefit from better mobility."

Moharer said two transportation actions are overdue in his opinion. East Texas Council of Government (ETCOG) needs to provide better transportation service and allow NET RMA to take the reins as liaison between Texas Department of Transportation and local transportation entities, he told the court.

Moharer said he supports STAC's recommendation and request that NET RMA be the primary voice for area mobility entities when dealing with TxDOT and other state and federal agencies. Current state rules designate ETCOG as the transportation voice, and Moharer said the mobility authority would do a better job of expediting area transportation initiatives.

The advisory committee voted unanimously to allow the NET RMA to become the primary representative and is awaiting the mobility authority's decision to accept

or deny that role. TxDOT has shown reluctance in accepting the NET RMA's increasing role in local transportation discussions, he said.

Commissioner Bill McGinnis told Beall he was a huge fan of the NET RMA and its initiatives and cited the hope that the authority could get TxDOT "in line."

Moharer said ETCOG also needs to increase its level of passenger transportation services for Smith County residents and asked the court to support discussion with TxDOT regarding all available transportation options.

"The needs are inconsistent to the amount of services provided," Moharer said.

Commissioner JoAnn Hampton said ETCOG has not significantly addressed transportation needs in rural areas and that needs to change. She said she would support a resolution in the coming weeks to make inquiries about Smith County's options.

Moharer said action needs to be taken to give local projects priority, with ready-to-go projects, whenever or however funds may be made available.

Commissioner Jeff Warr, who served as a member of the NET RMA board, said the mobility authority is a long-term planning organization and hopes that they play an integral part in Texas' development of thoroughfares as the region expands.

Warr said NET RMA's consistent planning and work will only benefit the area as it grows.

"East Texas will continue to grow and grow, outpacing much of the rest of the state," he said. "We are fortunate that if money comes out of Washington, (D.C.) East Texas will most likely get a portion because (the NET RMA) have the environmental and easement work done."

The court approved the following during the meeting:

The reappointment of Beall and Gary Halbrooks to the NET RMA Board of Directors;

Acceptance of more than \$97,000 from the Task Force on Indigent Defense Statement for Grant Award FY 2009 Formula Grant;

Spindlemedia contracts, including the software licensing agreement and the software maintenance agreement to update the tax office's ability to process tax information.