

RMA proposes 6 road projects for county

By Sandra Cason, News Messenger

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The 2008 annual report released recently by the North East Texas Regional Mobility Authority proposes the expenditure of almost \$5 billion on transportation improvements for its members.

A copy of the report, presented to commissioners during a recent meeting, includes a priority list of five Harrison County road projects at an estimated total cost of \$605,291,311.

It also proposes a sixth project — terminal improvements and runway lengthening at the airport — although cost estimates are not included.

The local presentation was made by Rodney Gilstrap and E.N. Smith III, the county's representatives on the NET RMA's 19-member board.

Also during the session, the court approved the re-appointment of Smith, who had previously been named to fill an unexpired term.

Gilstrap told commissioners the RMA encompasses a 12-county area, "which stretches from Texarkana to Canton, to Jacksonville and to the state line" and addresses "long range planning for approximately 600 miles of roadway.

In addition, he said, RMA planning includes high speed rail and airport transportation.

"It is a challenge and a pleasure to be a part of this group," Gilstrap said, adding he and Smith "are committed to seeing (Interstate Highway 69) come through Harrison County."

Counties pay membership fees to be a part of the regional planning group.

A cover letter to Harrison County Judge Richard Anderson, included in the annual report, notes "2008 was a difficult year for the state of Texas and the country in general.

"Our transportation infrastructure continues to deteriorate from use and age, but funds to maintain and build new road are scarce.

"The NET RMA's primary activity in 2008 was to research and explore new ways to fund transportation in northeast Texas.

"In February, (the group) entered into a partnership with Texas Transportation Institute to explore the feasibility of a mileage-based user fee program as an alternative to the fuel tax," the letter continues, and, in August, the group "began seeking financial partners to generate funding for Toll 49 and other NET RMA priority projects."

In November, the RMA received "good news that ... Toll 49, Segment 5, in Smith County and State Highway 42 in Gregg County were approved to receive funding through Proposition 14 bonds," the letter adds.

"The past year has shown that we can no longer rely on our state and federal governments to hand out money for our projects; we must work diligently to get them completed ourselves," the letter says.

"The NET RMA is up to the challenge, and we hope to partner closely with you to see the projects that will benefit your community come to fruition," the letter concludes.

Harrison County

priority projects

U.S. Highway 80

From a point 0.3 mile east of Farm-to-Market Road 450 in Hallsville to FM 968 north of Marshall, widen from a two- to four-lane divided, rural roadway for a length of 7.67 miles. Work may be financed via pass-through funding: \$52,733,000.

Harrison County Airport

Make improvements to the terminal and lengthen the runway. A preliminary description of the project is not available and there are no cost estimates.

State Highway 154

From Marshall to Harleton, upgrade to a standard two-lane section with paved shoulders, for a distance of 13.85 miles, to be financed through a combination of Texas Department of Transportation and federal funds: \$52,986,311.

Farm-to-Market Road 450

From FM 450 north of Hallsville to FM 450 south of Hallsville, construct a new two-lane relocation of the road. Project length has not yet been determined. Work may be financed via pass-through funding: \$27,051,000.

Loop 390

From Loop 390 at U.S. Highway 80 to U.S. Highway 59 south of Interstate Highway 20. Complete Loop 390 around Marshall and provide a connection to TTC 69, for a length of 7.89 miles, to be financed through a combination of TxDOT and federal funds: \$377,983,000.

Toll Road 49, Segment 8

From U.S. Highway 259 in Longview to U.S. Highway 59 in Marshall, construct a new two-lane toll road of an ultimate four-lane facility, for a length of 20.6 miles, to be financed via toll fees: \$94,538,000.

The following is a list of the 12 NET RMA counties and the sums of money proposed for transportation expenditures in each. The total is \$4,869,092,369.

Bowie: \$609,713,600;

Cass: \$135,452,000;

Cherokee: \$419,286,880;

Gregg: \$525,988,461;

Harrison: \$605,291,311;

Panola: \$419,234,000;

Rusk: \$290,056,000;

Smith: \$616,702,708;

Titus: \$557,670,000;

Upshur: \$314,175,500;

Van Zandt: \$208,288,909;

Wood: \$167,233,000.

The Web site, www.netrma.org, quotes RMA Chairman Jeff Austin III as saying that the group "has sought innovative solutions to our region's toughest transportation challenges," since its organization in 2004.

"We believe the best way to meet our goals is through shared understanding and strong partnerships with stakeholders in our region, from the citizens and elected officials of northeast Texas all the way up to our representatives in Washington D.C.," Austin says.

Beginning with Smith and Gregg counties, the RMA expanded in the summer of 2006 when Cherokee, Harrison, Rusk and Upshur counties joined, "marking the first time that any RMA in Texas had grown beyond its original founding members," Austin says.

The group "made history a second time" the following summer when Bowie, Cass, Panola, Titus, Van Zandt, and Wood counties joined.

"The NET RMA's approach to projects will be unique," Austin says. "It does not matter who gets credit for a project, who constructs it, or which agency moves it forward. We want to facilitate the process for the betterment of northeast Texas. If the region wins, we all win."