

Henderson loop closer to reality

TxDOT also providing planning, studies for Texas 149

By JIMMY ISAAC, Longview News Journal

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TYLER — Northeast Texas Regional Mobility Authority members on Wednesday announced an agreement that could boost Henderson's footing for a Loop 571 expansion.

RMA Rusk County representative John Cloutier said TxDOT officials have agreed to provide about \$1.5 million in planning and engineering services to expand Henderson's bypass from U.S. 79 South to U.S. 259 South.

That assistance will allow Rusk County commissioners to dedicate county funds exclusively to land acquisition for the 4.1-mile proposal.

The Texas Department of Transportation also will continue to help with the Texas 149 project in Gregg County, officials said.

During an RMA meeting Wednesday at the University of Texas at Tyler, authority members signed a revised agreement with Rusk County that reflected the funding change.

The county's expense could increase by \$200,000, but Cloutier said getting the Loop 571 expansion project shovel-ready as quickly as possible is a deal too good to pass up.

"I will have to cover that bridge with commissioners, but having a plan is worth much more than \$200,000," said Cloutier.

"The last six months have shown a new horizon between TxDOT and us in Rusk County."

County Judge Sandra Hodges said Rusk commissioners have funds set aside for the project, including any such increases.

She said she hopes either the county, transportation officials or the RMA secure federal stimulus money for the expansion, which would reduce traffic burdens on other Henderson roads and increase safety on south U.S. 259 where Henderson Independent School District plans to open its Wylie Elementary School late this summer, she said.

Cloutier said land acquisition is key. He expects inflation to drastically increase real estate prices along the corridor southwest of Henderson, so taking ownership of the property is best sooner rather than later, he said.

TxDOT has offered a similar boost to the Texas 149 widening project in southern Gregg County, according to Dale Booth, an advanced planning engineer with the agency's Tyler office. TxDOT completed environmental and planning studies and is handling construction design work for the more than \$25 million project, Booth said.

"TxDOT is really coming back to help the counties that are helping themselves," RMA Chairman Jeff Austin III said.

In another matter, Booth announced that TxDOT's Tyler District is applying to the Federal Highway Administration for the right to pursue studies to widen Interstate 20 through East Texas.

Since the RMA's founding in 2004, transportation leaders have tossed around plans to add tolled express lanes to the freeway between Terrell and the Louisiana state line, Austin said. Booth said federal authorization doesn't mean funding, but it does give the RMA authority to conduct a feasibility study.

Should the Interstate 20 expansion take place, existing lanes would not be tolled, Booth said.