

# NET RMA board to request 'East Texas Hourglass' funding

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TYLER — Directors of the North East Texas Regional Mobility Authority discussed the future of the Toll 49-East Texas Hourglass (ETHG) project during their board meeting Wednesday, and passed a resolution to seek funding for corridor studies.

In other action, the board of directors continued to progress toward completion of the entire Toll 49 project by voting to secure the services of a bond underwriting firm and begin plans, specifications and estimates for Toll 49 Segment 3B. The board also passed a revised interlocal agreement with Rusk County.

The ETHG is a proposed extension of Toll 49 and includes Toll 49 Segments 6, 6A, 7, 8 and 8A. The approximately 80-mile road would extend east from SH 110 to IH 20 at the Gregg County line, then north and east around Longview to US 259, and easterly to US 59 above Marshall. In 2006, the Texas Department of Transportation was studying potential alignment corridors and was in the midst of hiring a consultant to complete an overall corridor study when the project was halted due to lack of funding.

The NET RMA Toll 49 ETHG Subcommittee, chaired by Gregg County board member Dave Spurrier, is leading an effort to revive the project. On Wednesday the NET RMA Board of Directors affirmed a motion to submit a financial assistance request to TxDOT for \$2.8 million, which would cover conceptual corridor studies for the entire length of the project.

"This is an important project that would improve the lives of many East Texans," Spurrier said. "This financial assistance request is the first step in getting the project back on track."

In other business, the board of directors voted to secure a pool of bond underwriting service firms by selecting 10 financial firms, led by Merrill Lynch with Estrada Hinojosa as co-lead. These firms will be asked to provide underwriting services as the NET RMA seeks financing options for their priority projects. One of these priority projects is Toll 49 Segment 3B, which received approval to move forward into plans, specifications and estimates on Wednesday. The move paves the way for engineers to draft plans for the approximately 9.7-mile project, which stretches from SH 31 north to I-20.

"Our ultimate goal has always been for Toll 49 to reach I-20, and these votes take us one step closer to that goal," said Jeff Austin, III, NET RMA chairman.

In January the NET RMA voted to enter into an interlocal agreement with Rusk County for the continued development of Loop 571 around Henderson. Since that time the agreement has undergone several revisions, including the stated desire by TxDOT for the NET RMA to be responsible for right-of-way acquisition and preparation of environmental studies and permits.

On Wednesday directors affirmed the agreement, which is contingent on the acceptance of Rusk County's Commissioner's Court.