

Commissioners approve loop agreement

By Jamaal E. O'Neal, Longview News Journal

Tuesday, June 09, 2009

HENDERSON — Rusk County officials are moving forward with plans to extend Loop 571, but getting dirt moving on the project could take longer than anticipated.

Texas Department of Transportation Tyler district engineer Randy Hopmann told commissioners Monday that while TxDOT has offered to contribute \$1.7 million to help cover engineering and land acquisition costs, finding the funds to complete the project might be difficult.

"We want this to be shovel ready so when funds are available, Rusk County's project will top the list," Hopmann said. "Approving this resolution will help us in that endeavor so when funds come up, we can get dirt moving on the project."

Plans call for the bypass to be extended 4.1 miles from U.S. 79 South to U.S. 259 South.

John Cloutier, Rusk County's representative on the Northeast Texas Regional Mobility Authority Board, said it would cost about \$10 million to complete the project.

Cloutier said its unclear where the additional funds for construction will come from.

"I think once the Legislature decides what they're going to do with TxDOT, then we'll have an idea as for how and when this project will be funded and stated," Cloutier said.

Commissioners tentatively approved an agreement with the Northeast Texas Regional Mobility Authority and TxDOT to help fund environmental and engineering studies for the project, along with land costs for the proposed route.

County Judge Sandra Hodges said District Attorney Micheal Jimerson will examine the agreement before commissioners formally approve it during their June 18 meeting. If approved, the county's will use \$411,600 from its transportation budget to help cover engineering and land acquisition costs for the loop.

"We just want him to give it a second look before we move forward with this plan," Hodges said. "It never hurts to have a second pair of eyes when dealing with taxpayer money."