

Smith County Commissioners Court Votes To Address Transportation Concerns

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Smith County Commissioners Monday said "dragging our feet" led to "missed opportunities" in the past in addressing county transportation and parking needs. The court unanimously approved moving forward with plans to address both concerns.

The court voted -- as recommended by the Smith County Transportation Advisory Committee -- to expand the scope of the State Planning Funds Grant Application to include the creation of a multimodal use facility near downtown Tyler.

The court also approved \$10,000 in funding to help pay grant writing fees that, under conditions of the transportation grant, could not be taken from the awarded amount. Grant writing is expected to cost between \$15,000 and \$18,000, said owner of NDMJ Ltd. Transportation Services and STAC Chairman Jamal Moharer.

Moharer told the court he would attempt to raise the remaining portion of the grant writing fee, saying there was interest within the community for a multimodal facility. He said the facility goes along with the city's Tyler 21 plan and could address specific needs, such as parking, within the county's Carter-Goble-Lee planning report.

"We can't really invite businesses to come downtown if we cannot accommodate their needs," he said. "This will give an economic tool to those who are trying to promote downtown."

Moharer said the project is inline with the goals and objectives of Texas Department of Transportation as well as local planning committees including the city's Metropolitan Planning Organization and North East Texas Regional Mobility Authority.

Commissioner Terry Phillips voiced concerns about using public funds to advance possible private investment but Moharer said it is too early to consider who will invest in possible projects and that the court's action would be necessary to move forward.

Commissioner Jeff Warr said despite having no guarantee of receiving any grant funding, the preliminary work must be done to make it a possibility.

"Sometimes you have to put some money up before hand," he said. "It's the type of deal where we won't know if we qualify unless we spend the money up front."

He said the possible return on the county's initial \$10,000 could be between \$250,000 and \$300,000 if the grant is awarded. Moharer told the court, however, that the awarded amount will simply pay for the feasibility studies and pre-construction data, such as environmental impact studies, site assessments, conceptual drawings and needs analysis, that will enable the procurement of larger grants for "shovel ready" projects.

He said around 18 months may be needed to pinpoint what "shovel ready" projects will "look like" and cost but said the plan will include modes of transportation, specific location and accessibility. Moharer told the court that potential local transportation projects were "shot down" because they were not "shovel ready." Studies paid for by the grant will lay the groundwork for those and future transportation projects, he said.

"We believe the makeup of the team is right. The timing is right and the need is there, so we would be short-changing the citizens not to pursue it," Moharer said.

The court also approved:

Renewal of an agreement for inmate dental services with Dentrust Dental International, Inc.;

Approved civil filing fee of \$5 for each civil suit filed in county-level courts and district courts;

A resolution for Sears Tyler Methodist Retirement Corp. and its affiliates;

Approved policy revisions regarding county leave and emergency situations;

Appointed Mike Lusk, Charley Miller, Dean Ames, Cathy Black, Jennette Steveson, and Leonardo Brown as members to county Safety Committee.