

Regional transportation group shifts focus

By Glenn Evans gevans@news-journal.com | Posted: Wednesday, October 15, 2014 4:00 am

A 12-county highway planning council worked through an identity crisis during a four-hour discussion Tuesday, looking to define its role amid a host of panels working on highway and related strategies for local areas.

In claiming a niche as a ready resource for everything from engineering help to financing and project kick-starter, the North East Texas Regional Mobility Authority transitioned from a previous focus on an ambitious project extending Tyler's new outer loop to the northern tip of Marshall.

Smith County representative Gary Halbrooks, vice president of the 20-seat authority, finally said the board has been trying to swing for the seats, hit home runs. The authority's role should be less grandiose, he said, to no objection.

"More likely, it's going to be a single or a double," Halbrooks said.

Board Chairwoman Linda Thomas agreed, noting that Metropolitan Planning Organizations in Longview, Tyler and Texarkana already are coming up with projects and ranking them by local priority. So is the Rural Planning Organization within the 14-county East Texas Council of Governments.

"These MPOs all have different constituencies, and the RPOs do as well," Thomas said. "It's up to them to come to us with a project."

On top of those planning groups, a five-county Interstate 20 Corridor Working Group chaired by Gregg County Judge Bill Stoudt is devising a list of improvements it wants the 2015 state Legislature to fund for the interstate from East Dallas to the Louisiana line.

With \$200,000 available to put into projects, the authority's help could mean helping a community's road project by funding an environmental study or paying for engineering designs, members agreed.



Highway panel looks to redefine its regional role

North East Texas Regional Mobility Authority Chair Woman Linda Thomas speaks during the board meeting Tuesday, October 14, 2014, at the Longview Chamber of Commerce in Longview. (Kevin Green/News-Journal Photo)

Bowie County member Jeff Sandford said the mobility authority should be the go-to reference for any community that is planning a highway project.

“Whether it’s information, whether it’s support, whether it’s financing; whether it’s implementation — we can help with all of that,” Sandford said.

Some assistance needs little or no money.

The mobility authority helped the Cherokee County town of Wells, between Lufkin and Alto, find a grant through the East Texas Council of Governments to widen U.S. 69 and ease a two-lane bottleneck.

“Wells will be built, and if not for the (Regional Mobility Authority) it would probably not have been built,” Cherokee County representative Jack Traylor said.

Halbrooks recalled that authority members had visited Wells in response to the city’s call for road help.

“The RMA can take the lead, the RMA can be the co-pilot,” Halbrooks said. “The RMA can be in the back seat.”

Everett Owen, interim executive director of the authority, urged members to visit with county judges and other local road planners to ensure those people know they have a resource.

He also said he would add information to the authority’s website, netrma.org, including the addition of 138 PDF files Gregg County representative Dave Spurrier suggested Owen make available online. Those map out a myriad of projects, from rail lines to water pipelines.

“I’d like to have every map and report,” Spurrier said. “Let’s put all of them (on the site). The public can look at them; we can look at them. And I think it ought to be done soon.”

The mobility authority, comprised of members appointed by county commissioners’ courts, initially formed to oversee implementation of Tyler’s Toll Loop 49.

The panel’s vision later expanded to the Northeast Texas Hourglass, running from Loop 49’s southeast corner northeast across the top of Longview and over to Marshall’s Loop 290.

That project hit opposition when news broke of a segment planned through the oil fields around Clarksville City. The mobility authority agreed to find a new route and seemed to be leaning toward using U.S. 271 from I-20 toward Gladewater and northern Gregg County.

Those discussions appear stuck on high-center, and the hourglass was not a subject of talks Tuesday.

Thomas agreed later that Tuesday's meeting had been something of a watershed for the panel.

"It really was," she said. "We're such a new entity. And we don't have a role model, so we need to find our way. And our way, it's not going to be the same as in other regions of Texas."