



Beltway would send traffic around Alexandria and Pineville

By Jeff Matthews • jmatthews@thetowntalk.com • March 1, 2010

It may be decades away, but the first steps have been taken toward building a beltway that would connect major roads leading into and out of the Alexandria-Pineville area.

Prospective members of the Central Louisiana Regional Infrastructure Beltway Commission gathered Wednesday for an informal informational session. It was not technically a meeting, since the commission does not exist. Formation of the panel has been authorized by the state Legislature.

Those present seemed eager to get the process moving on a project they say should start as soon as possible. They hope the project will relieve traffic pressure and spur residential and commercial development.

"One day we're going to wake up and there's going to be more and more development in Central Louisiana, because people are going to get tired of running from the storms," said Elton Pody, president of the Central Louisiana Chamber of Commerce. "If we don't plan for that now, we won't have that opportunity."

"This is the kind of planning you do when you're serious about master planning," said Alexandria Mayor Jacques M. Roy. "This has all the pieces you want to see ... it's a brilliant thing. When you're planning for development, you need to plan 30 years out."

The idea of a beltway or loop around the Alexandria-Pineville area has been put forth for nearly 20 years. In 2006, for example, it was discussed in the context of urban sprawl and "smart growth" by those who were campaigning to become mayor of Alexandria, including Roy.

Legislation proposed by state Rep. Herbert Dixon and passed last year authorized the formation of the commission to plan, raise money for and operate a beltway.

It is a long-term project that, if it proceeds, would be completed in stages.

The details -- including the route it will take -- will take years to work out. Randy Gilchrist of Gilchrist Construction Co. presented a mockup Wednesday of a potential beltway route he made several years ago.

The concept is a transportation and utility corridor that would loop around Alexandria and Pineville in Rapides Parish and possibly southern Grant Parish. It would intersect major roads such as Interstate 49, La. Highway 28 East and West, U.S. Highway 165 North and South, U.S. Highway 71 North and South and La. Highway 1 South.

The ease of travel to points throughout the area and the presence of utility services such as sewer and water would attract development along the beltway route, proponents say, providing the infrastructure for housing developments,

industrial sites and more.

Those perceived benefits come at a price. Traffic would bypass existing businesses, for example, and taxpayers would have to pay to extend municipal utilities farther out.

Overall, Pody said, a beltway would be a big help in attracting business to the area.

"This is one of the most important things we can do

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for future development in Central Louisiana," Pody said. "If you have a good plan, when people are looking for a place to locate, they want to go to a place like that."

A beltway also would ease what Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development officials say are serious traffic concerns projected in coming years.

The most recent traffic study for Alexandria/Pineville projects a 49 percent increase in traffic volume on 10 major roads coming in and out of Alexandria/Pineville by 2029.

A loop could ease that by diverting traffic that would otherwise go through the cities around the cities. A student from Boyce traveling to LSUA on U.S. 71 South, for example, could avoid driving through town and take the loop instead.

"There are significant traffic volume increases over the next 20 years," said Nick Verrett, district engineer administrator for District 8 of the state Department of Transportation and Development. "In the absence of a loop, guess where all that traffic has to go? All those arterials through town. I don't know how the existing system can handle all this. It's apparent we have to have something to relieve that pressure."

"Transportation is not about distance, it's about time," Gilchrist said. "If I can get to work in 30 minutes, I'm going to enjoy that job more than if it takes me an hour-and-a-half." First meeting

Meeting planned

The commission will hold its first meeting in two weeks, where members will be sworn in. After that, official business may be conducted.

One of the first orders of business likely will be to raise enough money to commission a study of potential routes.

Matt Johns with the Rapides Area Planning Commission suggested the beltway commission apply for funds from the Louisiana Recovery Authority, which has access to federal hurricane relief money.

The 14-member commission is to include the mayors of Alexandria, Pineville, Woodworth, Ball and Boyce; the chancellors of Louisiana State University at Alexandria and Louisiana College; the executive director of the England Authority; the presidents of the Alexandria City Council, the Rapides Parish Police Jury, the Grant Parish Police Jury and the Avoyelles Parish Police Jury; the local highway district administrator; and a representative from the Chamber of Commerce. Those officials can designate someone to serve in their stead.

"We've nurtured the baby long enough," Pody said. "It's time to birth the baby."

Traffic projections for Alexandria/Pineville based on studies commissioned by the Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development, including daily traffic volume in 2009 and 2029.

Road 2009 2029 % increase

US 71 N 4,751 6,678 41

US 167 N 11,054 14,784 32

US 165 N 12,112 16,854 39

La. 28 E 11,720 16,695 42

La. 1 S 9,786 15,449 59

US 71 S 7,145 9,928 39

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I-49 S 21,937 40,024 82

US 165 S 9,940 14,565 47

La. 28 W 14,179 20,458 44

I-49 N 16,943 22,536 33

Total 119,567 177,971 49

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