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Residents review widening plan

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ALLEN -- A public meeting regarding the proposed widening of US 75 attracted residents to the Allen Parks and Recreation building by the carload Tuesday night, all eager to learn how the project would affect their way of life.

Hosted by the Texas Department of Transportation, the meeting outlined the department's plan to widen the main thoroughfare from six to eight lanes between Spring Creek Parkway in Plano to SH 121 in Fairview. The 7.3-mile project will use the state's right-of-way with no anticipated residential or commercial displacements, said Mark Petitt, public information officer for TxDOT's Dallas District.

"This is not common to get such a turn out at public meetings," Petitt said. "But this is where we really want to hear people's concerns because this is when we can make some huge changes.

TxDOT is preparing environmental documentation to support its design with state approval expected in late summer. A public hearing for the \$142 million project is tentatively scheduled for June, with construction following in late 2012 or early 2013.

With congestion worsening along this stretch over the past several years, the added ramps and extra lanes should alleviate some of the backup, Petitt said.

The highway was widened from I-635 to Spring Creek Parkway in the mid 1990s. Prior to that, the traffic count was approximately 164,000 vehicles per day in 1992. The count has since increased to 250,000 vehicles per day in 2010, he said.

"About 10 years ago we went through some hefty renovations and widening, and at that point people were like, 'there will never be enough cars,'" Petitt said. "We've seen a ton a growth here and traffic is going to continue to go up. It's a bottleneck."

In addition to the widening, existing interchanges will be maintained but ramp reversals are being considered at many of these in order to minimize congestion along frontage roads and increase merging capabilities. In other words, the existing ramps will have their physical positions reversed -- i.e. the off-ramp will become an on-ramp -- and the on-ramp will become an off-ramp, said Lloyd Neal, transportation engineer manager for the city of Plano.

"The goal in doing so is to increase the distance from the ramp to the frontage road intersection [which is typically signalized]," Neal said. "The increased distance provides

drivers the ability to safely move over into their lane of choice before encountering any backed-up traffic waiting at the signalized intersection. With a more leisurely lane change opportunity the number of traffic crashes will decrease and drivers will be more likely to adhere to other traffic controls in the area."

Many who attended the open house reside in Rolling Hills Estates, a community located adjacent to North Central Expressway just south of Exchange Parkway in Allen. Besides noise concerns, many contend that a proposed off ramp -- located near the Rolling Hills entrance at Glenwick Place -- also has the potential to create accidents and increase traffic congestion along the frontage road.

Raymond Cotnoir has lived on Glenwick since 1977 and said motorists exit at Allen Drive to get to Exchange and rarely obey the speed limit while passing Glenwick. The high rates of speed, as well as a blind curb just before the subdivision, already creates problems for residents attempting to leave the neighborhood. Adding an extra flow of cars with the off ramp would just add to the chaos, Cotnoir said.

If the ramp is put in, many Rolling Hills Estates residents said TxDOT should consider closing off Glenwick.

"People are going 65 [mph] and the speed limit is 40," Cotnoir said. "Show me someone going 40 and they'll get rear-ended. It makes it impossible to pull out."

Cotnoir's neighbor, Derek Eldridge, said the noise has always been a problem and is convinced the widening will just make things worse.

"I can hear semis, everything from my house. It woke me up this morning at 3 a.m.," Eldridge said. "I have a 4-year-old daughter, too, so I'm pretty annoyed by the way they're doing things."

Rolling Hills resident Jim Longley measured the decibel levels from the edge of the subdivision at the highway and said roadway activity registered at 96dB. Levels between 90 and 95dB can result in hearing loss with sustained exposure.

With few sound barriers in place along this route, Longley shared Eldridge's fear that the widening will bring the noise closer to home.

"Anything new would be tremendously worse than this," Longley said. "It's enough to make your ears ring."

Longley's neighbor, Beverly Birdwell, said she hopes TxDOT takes all the comments submitted from Thursday night's meeting into serious account, as the request for sound barriers were not deemed as cost effective in TxDOT's environmental assessment from 1995.

"We are concerned because they didn't do anything last time and they probably aren't going to do anything this time," Birdwell said.

Plano has implemented ramp reversals similar to those featured in the proposed project with positive results, Neal said. The reversals have proven to add a third less congestion, increased distance to facilitate merging and improved safety overall.

"The improvements we made on US 75 are going on eight years now," Neal said. "Now that we have the Dallas Tollway and SH 121, these main instrumental cogs working, we need to get the main lines completed."

Collin County commissioners Joe Jaynes, Duncan Webb and Matt Shaheen were at the meeting to talk to residents like Birdwell to understand the benefits of the expansion, as well as their constituents' concerns.

Shaheen said the dialogue between residents and TxDOT is instrumental in making sure the project is designed appropriately to adequately serve the entire North Texas region.

"I'm very pleased by the high citizen turnout, this is their opportunity to provide input," Shaheen said. "Improving transportation is increasingly important to our community's future, we are tripling in size and who knows where it will go from here. Improving our infrastructure is great for this county."

For information pertaining to this project, visit www.txdot.gov.

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