

LOCAL NEWS

Briefing worries Corinth leaders

Mayor tells council about lack of vote on proposed Interstate 35E widening

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By Peggy Heinkel-Wolfe / Staff Writer

CORINTH — Denied a vote on the state’s committee meant to bring together stakeholders in the proposed widening of Interstate 35E, city leaders worried aloud last week whether Corinth’s interests would be compromised.

Mayor Paul Ruggiere provided the City Council a briefing during the council’s regular meeting Thursday. He told the group that while many entities wanted a seat at the table, Corinth and others were denied.

Ruggiere remains a member of the committee, which was established by state Senate Bill 1420, but he said he learned at the first meeting that he won’t get to vote.

Officials with the Texas Department of Transportation limited the committee to five voting members, including Dallas and Denton counties, the city of Carrollton, the North Texas Tollway Authority and the North Central Texas Council of Governments.

Corinth has made significant improvements to its collector and arterial roads in recent years. All those improvements were made based on plans TxDOT had been sharing for the past five years, Ruggiere said.

More troubling, however, was the news that there was little funding for the project, that TxDOT missed the estimated cost by about \$2 billion, and that the toll lanes will be built first, Ruggiere said.

“The thinking is that they can accomplish this [original plan] by building it in phases, and the managed toll lanes would go in first,” Ruggiere said. “Some have called these scaled back projects ‘I-35 Lite.’

“But when I ask when the free lanes would go in, no one has an answer for that,” he added.

The committee favors a proposal that under two of its three options in the construction plans, Corinth Parkway would remain an overpass — something that could save the project \$40 million in construction, Ruggiere said.

Both Corinth and the Denton County Transportation Authority have constructed parts of Corinth Parkway as if the street would change to an underpass when I-35E is widened.

Ruggiere told the council that there are serious questions now whether the county, which has dedicated \$600 million to the project, should even move forward.

Those questions include whether the county should be using its funds to build managed toll lanes in Dallas County when it is unclear how long they will be in existence.

Furthermore, with the phase-in, some in Denton County are looking for assurance that the toll money would stay in the corridor and not go to other regional projects, as happened with State Highway 121.

Ruggiere encouraged the council to stay involved because a decision could come in the next few weeks.

Council member Bruce Hansen said the latest information packet talks about financial analyses that are to be provided, including municipal finance.

“What are they talking about?” Hansen said. “Are they looking to cities for that \$1.5 billion? We don’t have that kind of money. We build streets. TxDOT is supposed to build highways. That’s their job.”

Ruggiere said the agency was looking for money anywhere they could find it.

“I don’t know if bake sales are to be included,” Ruggiere said.

Council member John Booher reminded other council members that Denton County was supposed to get back from the state the money it pays in gas taxes for building roads, too. He called the change in the project’s scope a “big switcheroo.”

Transportation consultant John Polster represents Denton County as a voting member of the committee.

Aside from Polster, Booher said he had little confidence that any of the other members on the committee would vote with Denton County’s interest in mind.

“I smell a lawsuit coming,” Booher said.

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IF YOU GO

What: 1420 Committee meeting on widening of Interstate 35E

When: 1:30 p.m., Tuesday

Where: Denton County Transportation Authority, 1660 S. I-35E, Suite 250, Lewisville

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