

Proposal to Extend Pellissippi Parkway South Once More Moves Along

By Frank N. Carlson

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On Monday, the public's opportunity to contribute its two cents to the debate on whether 4.4 miles of farmland in Blount County should become a four-lane highway draws to a close.

The Tennessee Department of Transportation and the Federal Highway Administration are considering extending Pellissippi Parkway to the south yet again, this time from its current terminus at Old Knoxville Highway (State Route 33) to East Lamar Alexander Highway (US 321). The extension would be the last piece of an interstate plan dating back to 1977, when Pellissippi ran only from Oak Ridge to I-40. In 1986, the Urgent Highway Needs Plan called for extending it to 321, to be built in four sections from 1987 to 2005. Plans for this last extension were scheduled to move forward in 2002, but a lawsuit filed by the local group Citizens Against the Pellissippi Parkway Extension Inc. has held them up for the past eight years.

The lawsuit claimed that, under the National Environmental Policy Act of 1970, TDOT could not move forward without first performing an environmental impact statement, a comprehensive study detailing the effect an interstate would have on the area. An EIS is required when the federal government engages in "major federal actions significantly affecting the environment," and isn't limited to how building the road would affect endangered plants or animals in its path. Rather, it's a holistic analysis that takes into account direct, indirect, and cumulative effects on air quality, ecology, historic and archaeological sites, noise levels, communities, the economy, etc. An EIS does not determine whether a project proceeds, but what effects its procession might have.

TDOT had performed a less comprehensive study known as an environmental assessment, which includes only "brief discussions" on some of the topics listed above. That assessment was initiated in 1999, approved by the Federal Highway Administration in early 2002, and land purchasing was set to begin that summer. However, the lawsuit by CAPPE led a judge in the U.S. District Court of Middle District of Tennessee to place an injunction on the project until an EIS could be issued. TDOT withdrew the environmental assessment and agreed to perform an EIS.

Eight years later, in April of this year, TDOT released a 370-page draft environmental impact statement, which the public can now comment on. (It's on TDOT's website, at www.tdot.state.tn.us/pellissippi/pdfs/DEIS_04-15-10.pdf.) In addition to discussing the proposals for extension, the draft is required to discuss any reasonable alternatives to extension, so four options are listed: two to extend Pellissippi by building a four-lane highway on about four and a half miles of farmland, each project estimated to cost around \$100 million; another to beef up an existing stretch of two-lane roads for about \$60 million; and another not to build at all. The

Blount County Chamber of Commerce supports either of the first two options. CAPPE supports only the last, the no-build option, saying the \$60 million option does nothing for other roads in the area that need improvements.

Connecting Pellissippi to 321, which runs roughly parallel to I-40 through Maryville, would create another artery to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park—this one through Townsend, a city that prides itself on being the “quiet side of the Smokies.” Despite the risk of greater development, Townsend vice-mayor Ron Palewski says he’s in favor of the extension. “We definitely want to keep it the quiet side, but in order to survive, we have to have tourists,” Palewski says. The extension would also complete the first full quadrant of the Southern Loop, a proposed beltway around Maryville and Alcoa.

The Chamber of Commerce makes a similar pro-development case, saying the interstate will spur economic activity and ease traffic. “There will not be as much congestion of traffic in downtown Maryville, and easier access to the Great Smoky Mountains,” says Bryan Daniels, president and CEO of the Chamber. The plan itself says the project is needed to address the poor local roads, congestion, and frequent car crashes that result from vehicles passing through Maryville’s core.

Meanwhile, in arguing against the extension, CAPPE makes a fairly conventional anti-development case, saying building the interstate will lead to more urban sprawl, destroying the rural character of the area (“just like West Knoxville,” its brochure warns) and producing greater air pollution, contamination of drinking water, loss of wildlife habitat, and other detrimental effects. CAPPE also points out that the draft plan lists five archaeological sites potentially eligible for the National Register of Historic Places that would be affected by building either extension.

But there’s an interesting wrinkle: According to CAPPE’s analysis, written by its members and by consultants it hired, the draft itself admits the extension will fail to fix the problems its planners set out to address. “What is most striking about the materials TDOT released,” says Nina Gregg, spokeswoman for CAPPE, “is that they say over and over and over again this highway will not improve highway congestion, will not improve levels of service on our roads—and they still want to spend hundreds of millions of dollars.” CAPPE’s 10-page analysis concludes, “What do we get for \$100 million? An estimated 10 minute reduction in drive time. At \$10 million per minute, this is an irresponsible expenditure of public dollars...” Daniels declines to address Gregg’s claim, saying only that his interpretation of the plan is that “some efficiencies will be gained through the project.”

Since TDOT released the draft, CAPPE has been working to solicit comments on it from the public before the Aug. 30 deadline. Gregg advises those who wish to offer their opinions on the plan not use TDOT’s comment form on its website but instead write letters. She says the form is misleading because it says the “no-build” option would result in no local road improvements, whereas her group contends, and Gregg believes the draft statement says, that funding designated for this area could be used for just that. “There are at least a dozen road improvement projects that will proceed, whether the extension is built or not,” Gregg says.

After the comment period ends, TDOT will work to issue its final EIS, in which it must respond to every issue raised in the complaints. This process is estimated to take about 18 months, and TDOT will then submit the EIS to the Federal Highway Administration. Assuming it’s approved, TDOT can then return to the judge who issued the injunction to have it lifted and begin acquiring land. At

that point, CAPPE says it would try to determine whether it could challenge the project on other grounds.

Whether the project then moves forward probably depends on this November's elections and who the next governor appoints as transportation commissioner. However, the candidates aren't revealing much. Republican nominee Bill Haslam has said he supports the extension, and his campaign spokesman, David Smith, offers this in an email: "Mayor Haslam had a chance to hear all sides of this issue, and he believes the extension would make a big difference for the area." Democratic nominee Mike McWherter says the plan needs further study.

On a related note, word broke this week that the Federal Highway Administration is considering building an interstate connecting Knoxville to Savannah, Ga., possibly cutting through US 129 in Blount County, aka the "Tail of the Dragon."

You can send comments to:

Project Comments
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