Transportation council votes to eliminate overpass project

By KIM JACKSON CHRONICLE CORRESPONDENT
March 3, 2009, 12:50PM

Relief swept across the faces of several Copperfield-area residents after the Houston-Galveston Area Council’s Transportation Policy Council made the decision Friday to eliminate a Texas 6/FM 529 overpass project.

Jan Perino, a member of the Copperfield Coalition that opposed the project, fought back tears as she watched the multi-agency council cast the vote. The Texas Department of Transportation’s representative, Delvin Dennis, was the only council member who voted to keep the project in place.

“Today’s vote means that our community will not have to face an overpass project,” Perino said. “We can now address problems on the corridor through access management studies. We see today’s decision as a win-win for Copperfield residents and businesses.”

Damaging results

Coalition members argued the estimated $30 million Texas 6/FM 529 project would have damaged Copperfield residents’ quality of life because of its massive presence in the master-planned community, and would have driven some area businesses out of business during and after construction.

The now-defunct project included the construction of two through lanes in both directions on a new overpass section on Texas 6, and five at-grade lanes running parallel to that overpass on Texas 6. FM 529 would be widened to six lanes with two left-turn lanes and one right-turn lane on both sides of the intersection.

Improving safety

TxDOT officials have said the overpass project was proposed to improve safety conditions and mobility, and to cut down on the accident rate at that busy intersection. Crash data released at the public meeting (2005-2007) showed there were 64 accidents per every 1 million cars going through the intersection.

When the community raised concerns about the project, TxDOT sought guidance from the Transportation Policy Council about the project’s future. An amendment was proposed to remove that project from the Transportation Improvement Program, the list that all federally-funded projects in Houston and surrounding counties must be included on in order to move forward with construction plans.

Value of public input

The public’s voice was heard, said Raquelle Lewis, a TxDOT spokeswoman.
“This was a demonstration of the value of public input and the value we place on being responsive to public input,” Lewis said.

Though the battle against this project is won, Perino said residents and business owners who make up the coalition know there is a pressing need to relieve traffic pressure at the congested intersection, and along the entire stretch of the Texas 6 and FM 529 roadways.

“We realize we still have work to do,” Perino said.

The coalition proposed and alternative plan as part of lobbying efforts against the overpass project.

Other ideas

The coalition’s alternative solution involves the addition of one left turn lane, one right turn lane and one through lane in each quadrant of the intersection, and keeps both roadways at ground level. The plans also includes the construction of “green medians” on the Texas 6 and FM 529 corridors; the construction of a traffic signal to control access into the Randall’s and Best Buy shopping centers on Texas 6; traffic light synchronization on both roadways; and traffic signal preemption for emergency vehicles and during evacuations.

No funds for alternative

Regional transportation officials warned coalition members that the “Category 8 Safety Highway” funds TxDOT had earmarked for the project would not be used for an alternative project if the overpass project was eliminated. Alternative solutions would have to be funded through an alternative method or agreement.

Copperfield residents who supported the overpass project said the funds were available and ready to be spent on the project as an important factor in moving the project forward.

Huge mistake

Brock Miller, a Copperfield Southcreek Village resident, said the project was a prudent and cost-effective expenditure of public funds. He said it would be a huge mistake to cancel a funded project that would improve safety and mobility.

Miller said that it was important to take into account the safety and well-being of all motorists who use the intersection everyday to get to and from work and home, not just the Copperfield community.

“We all share a common and sincere desire to do what is best for our community,” Miller said. “We just have different views on how to get there.”

Perino said it has been a roller-coaster ride for coalition members during their almost four-year battle to defeat the overpass, but they were extremely grateful to Harris County Judge Ed Emmett and state Rep. Gary Elkins-R, Houston, for helping them along the way.
Coalition member Rick Scialdone was not able to witness the final vote, she said, but his efforts were monumental in getting the coalition to the finish line.

**Importance of planning**

The importance of planning ahead in transportation cannot be overemphasized, said Ned Holmes, a transportation policy council member. Had the overpass been constructed before the Texas 6/FM 529 intersection developed, he said businesses could have acclimated to it. It could have helped the intersection as opposed to potentially damaging businesses and the community.