

Newport awaits decisions on Ky. 8 exit from I-471

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NEWPORT - The future of the congested Ky. 8 exit off Interstate 471 in Newport still concerns many residents, but little information in the past year has come from the state about plans to improve it.

Kentucky Transportation Cabinet officials couldn't give a start date for the project and won't know until 2012 if construction funds will be allocated.

Between 2005 and 2009, the transportation cabinet held public meetings about the exit with Newport residents and leaders, but there haven't been any public meetings this year.

The state's goal for the project is to reduce the backup on the Daniel Carter Beard Bridge from the southbound Newport/Bellevue exit onto Ky. 8.

The state still has three alternatives for design of the new Ky. 8/I-471.

The residents and city leaders want the current southbound I-471 exit ramp out of the residential neighborhood.

Southbound I-471 traffic exits onto Park Avenue right by Cory Siddall's house on Second Street.

Siddall and others in Newport fear the state will choose an option that will leave that ramp where it is and make fewer changes than other plans. A committee of residents favored an alternative that would close the problematic Park Avenue ramp and put the ramp along Riviera Drive next to the Party Source.

Siddall said when he bought the home on Groundhog Day 1989, little traffic came off the exit into Newport, he said. Since then, Newport on the Levee opened and the East Row neighborhood went through a renaissance of rehabs.

"Traffic gets worse and worse," Siddall said. "It is hard to get out. It depends on how much guts you have that day."

Of the remaining three design alternatives the state is considering, two would close the Park Avenue ramp and relocate the southbound exit onto Riviera. The other would keep the Park Avenue exit open and make some lane re-striping and traffic signal changes and some widening.

The state has not picked an alternative, said Nancy Wood, spokeswoman for the highway department in Northern Kentucky.

The state must receive federal approval for a report on the environmental impact of the project before an alternative is picked, she said. The transportation cabinet this year has been making adjustments to the designs of each alternative based on the historical review from the Kentucky Heritage Council of structures in the project area, Wood wrote in an e-mail.

Then the project must get construction funds. The state legislature didn't fund the project in the 2010-2012 highway construction plan and won't get another opportunity to fund it until 2012, Wood wrote.

"Without funding, even with a preferred alternate, the project cannot move forward," Wood wrote.

Concern in Newport about the direction of the project rose in February 2009 when a project newsletter indicated staff preferred the alternative that would keep the Park Avenue ramp open. The state retracted that statement, but many city leaders remained skeptical.

The traffic numbers the state is using for the design don't take into account future development along Ky. 8, said City Commissioner Beth Fennell, who has worked on this and other transportation issues on the board of the Ohio-Kentucky-Indiana Regional Council of Governments. The exit where it currently sits is dangerous, she said.

"I think it is not only an impediment to development; more importantly, it is a safety issue," Fennell said.

In 2007, the Kentucky Transportation Cabinet reported that the exit had a crash rate about six times higher than the state's critical crash rate threshold for an urban area.

The city in 2009 commissioned its own traffic study of the interchange from TEC Engineering in Mason. The engineer's report concluded the alternative that would keep the Park Avenue ramp open "could be used as an immediate improvement to the project area but a longer term solution should be selected to mitigate the congestion at this intersection."

Building a larger ramp in the East Row neighborhood would do more harm than good for Newport, said City Manager Tom Fromme.

"That is not what the residents want," Fromme said. "They don't want the current ramp to be there in their neighborhood."