

Trans Texas Corridor

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TxDOT official: Plans for massive TTC will likely change

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NACOGDOCHES — In what may have been the first hint of victory for opponents of the Trans Texas Corridor, a high-ranking Texas Department of Transportation official said Thursday he regretted his agency's communication failures and said one proposed version of the corridor, a 10-lane super highway with rail and utility pathways, will "probably not" be built in East Texas, based on the overwhelming resistance to the idea expressed at public hearings on the project this month.

Phillip Russell, assistant executive director for innovative project development at TxDOT, was the keynote speaker at the Lone Star Legislative Summit at SFA Thursday, where he told listeners that "a lot of people that are supporting the notion of (TTC) 69 only do so if we use the existing roadway."

Russell said the most likely plan, based on public input, will be an enlargement of U.S. Hwy 59, with additional services like rail and utilities added as needed in separate areas — a departure from the plan for a 1,200 foot wide corridor that would pass east of Nacogdoches and gobble up thousands of acres of private land.

"Is it still possible that it might make sense to have all of that in a single corridor?" Russell said. "Yes. But is it more likely that it will be separated, and there will be pieces here and there? Yeah, I think clearly that's the direction we're heading."

Public comments on the TTC-69 project are being collected through March 19, and Russell acknowledged that there is a long, legally prescribed process before any final decisions are made. The three official options for the TTC project call for taking no action at all; building a whole new highway described in the Tier One Draft Environmental Impact Statement released last year; or enlarging existing highways. TxDOT officials have always said their policy is to consider the latter option first, but with the emphatic outcry against new construction, Russell said, that option is seeming more and more likely to become reality.

"I would be very surprised if we hear any other comments other than 'stay on 59 if you build it,'" Russell said. "I would anticipate — me as one person at TxDOT — that's where my view is. We need to look very closely at 59 — add lanes to 59."

Russell's remarks, though encouraging for those opposed to the highway project, are far from a final decision on the project. A revised environmental impact statement addressing substantive comments collected at public meetings, will face review by the federal highway administration this winter.

Nor would enlarging the footprint of U.S. Hwy 59 relieve landowners completely of the risk of having their land acquired for government use. Because the existing right-of-way around the U.S. Hwy 59 is so narrow, surrounding land would almost certainly be condemned to accommodate extra lanes or bypass routes involved in the expansion.

"It does create some challenges, obviously," Russell said. "Trying to build 59 through Houston is something else. And even if you come up here through East Texas, whether it's through Nacogdoches or Lufkin or Diboll, we're going have to look pretty closely."

Russell said the state would work with cities and counties on the process. He also encouraged everyone in attendance at the luncheon to participate in the commenting process, which he said was of paramount importance.

Those in the audience did not seem fazed by Russell's remarks about the highway, and most of the questions asked after his presentation focused on the lack of mass transit systems in Texas.

During his talk, Russell also touched on the financial aspect of public transportation in Texas, essentially repeating the conclusions of a recently released report by the federal government that describes an aging and increasingly-ineffective revenue system. Russell said tolls will be essential to fund any work on the TTC, and said consumers may also see a hike in the fuel tax, which has been stagnant since 1991.

Bruce Partain, CEO and president of the Nacogdoches County Chamber of Commerce, which hosted the legislative summit, said his organization will continue to provide information about the TTC project to the community