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Administration presents revised traffic impact fee plan

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By Aaron E. Looney *The Ascension Citizen*

In an effort to get the matter on an upcoming full council agenda, Parish President Ronnie Hughes and DPW Director Bill Roux presented a revised expenditure plan Tuesday for a proposed transportation impact fee.

The two outlined the plan and fielded questions from council members during a Transportation Committee meeting in the council chambers at the Courthouse East in Gonzales.

The matter did not appear on the council's agenda, and was taken up in discussions of new business.

"This is something we can put there and start talking about," Roux said.

The documentation spelled out a Highway Corridor Presentation Plan, which works to "protect the character of area of a corridor for future planned infrastructure improvements."

The plan also states that the projects should be limited to state and federal roads in the parish, but Roux said that if local roads meet requirements for addition into the plan, they would be included.

The most notable difference in the plan calls for one parishwide district to be created, rather than a multiple-district idea proposed previously by consultant Duncan & Associates. Some council members questioned the move, but Roux said that creating one district would ensure that all of the revenue generated by the fees would be spent on the parish's Highway Corridor Preservation Plan and Master Transportation Priority Projects Plan.

Projects that are preliminarily part of the plans include:

€ Enhancement of the road-widening project for Hwy. 42 from U.S. 61 to the Livingston Parish line

€ Multi-laning Hwy. 431 from the Livingston Parish line to U.S. 61

€ Multi-laning Hwy. 30 from Hwy. 44 to U.S. 61

€ Enhancing the current plan to extend Hwy. 44 from Interstate 10 to River Road

€ Multi-laning an extension of Hwy. 22 from I-10 to River Road via property owned by Ormet

€ Enhancing the standard of Roddy Road from Hwy. 621 to U.S. 61

€ Multi-laning Hwy. 73 from Hwy. 74 to Hwy. 30

€ Creating a new interchange along I-10 at Hwy. 74

€ Multi-laning Hwy. 621 from Hwy. 431 to Hwy. 73

€ Creating a new industrial corridor and extending St. Landry Road to intersect with Hwy. 42

€ Extending Hwy. 3127 to meet with Hwy. 1 to create a new hurricane evacuation route

€ Mult-laning Hwy. 70 from Hwy. 22 to the Sunshine Bridge

€ Extending Hwy. 42 to meet with I-10

€ Creating frontage roads along I-10 at selected locations, with access to the interstate

"These are the same projects that you plan to do with the impact fee," Roux said. "This way, the public knows exactly what you're going to be doing with that money."

Roux said that projects may be taken out or added to the project at any time before it is finalized.

In the presentation, Roux also listed income projections from the proposed impact fee and a proposed half-cent sales tax. According to the presentation, the impact fee is set to collect an estimated \$2.5 million a year, possibly leveraged with federal funding. According to the revised plan, impact fee revenue would be used for planning, preliminary engineering, design studies, land surveys and alignment studies. The funds would also go toward right of way acquisition and minor or incidental construction projects to relive immediate problems until major construction can take place.

Roux stressed that impact fees are designed to address future concerns, while the sales tax would allow the parish to tackle road projects sooner.

"We're looking at not only three lanes, but four lanes on some of these highway projects," said Roux, who added that the plan would not need to go to a vote of the people and could pass with a super majority vote of the council.

Committee chair Cheryl Fontenot disagreed with the single-district idea, but she added that parish residents do need to know exactly where their tax dollars are going to be spent on the road projects.

"We can say this is what we're going to do," Fontenot said. "The people don't trust us. I don't trust us. That's just the truth of the matter. We could put it on a ballot and they vote for it and that's where it has to go. We're being asked to tax people and say, 'Trust us. We're going to do these things in the next 25 years.' I don't think people are going to buy that."

Roux said that if the tax would have been implemented 10 years ago, "major projects would be up now."

Hughes urged the council to come to a decision soon and also said that he is open to discussing other ideas if the council does not agree with the proposal.

"If you have a better plan, the administration would like to hear it," Hughes said.

The committee did not make any recommendation in the matter, but members said they would like an opinion in writing from Duncan before acting.

In other matters, the committee also voted to heed the advice of Parish Attorney Ricky Babin and come to a compromise with New Orleans-based Barriere Construction Company and Professional Engineering Consultants Corp. of Baton Rouge regarding problems with

work on the parish's \$4 million road project, which was not completed.

The project, which was bid in 2004, called for the resurfacing of L. Landry Road and Bayou Henderson Road.

Babin, who was not present at the meeting, suggested that the parish have PEC leave the completed portions of road alone and to simply replace the portions which were not completed in the original project. Other options included leaving the project as is and assessing a penalty against the firms, having PEC compensate with 8,000 linear feet of remedial work or reconstructing the roads entirely.

Councilman Doug Hillensbeck said he would rather have had Barriere replace the entire project, citing that he did not want the roadways to look "patchworked."

However, Councilman Kent Schexnaydre said that the "patchwork" term was a misnomer and that the sections of road which would be replaced may not match in terms of color at first, but they would in time. He also said that the road integrity would be uniform on the entire project.

Hillensbeck made a motion to that degree, which Councilman George Valentine seconded for the sake of discussion. Valentine later rescinded his second and offered a substitute motion to follow Babin's advice, which the committee approved 3-1. Hillensbeck opposed the motion.

Roux said the problems stemmed from a "bad construction team" and vowed that with new regulations in place, the problem would never happen again.

When the project was originally bid in 2004, Hillensbeck questioned why council members chose PEC over local firm Glenn Shaheen and Associates (GSA). The hiring of an engineer firm sparked controversy in the past as some members of the previous council and former Parish President Harold Marchand questioned GSA's performance and pricing. Several projects were delayed due to the debate over who would get the engineering contract. Thursday, Hillensbeck said he had not been invited to "private meetings" on the topic and questioned why the council suddenly wants to settle with PEC.

"If there is a problem on the parish's part, I think we will improve on what we need to do to protect the taxpayers," Hillensbeck said.

The matter will next go before the full council for vote at its next meeting, scheduled for Thursday at the Courthouse East in Gonzales. The council's decision will then be sent to Barriere for review and response.

In other news, the committee also viewed and approved a public service announcement asking residents to watch their speeds when traveling through parish neighborhoods and school zones.

Fontenot, who has urged residents in the past to watch their speeds, said that she hopes the PSA will help to curb some of the excessive speeding.

The PSA will air on the parish's government access channel until a more enhanced version can be created, Fontenot said. Schexnaydre suggested that the parish obtain video or still photographs of problem areas and include them in the updated creation.

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