

news

Morning News

County residents question need to expand FM552

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Part of FM552 in Rockwall County has some residents questioning whether the upgrade of the country road is

needed. The meeting was held in the cafeteria of Rockwall's Williams Middle School on April 10 as residents and officials discussed the

project. TxDOT's Transportation hosted the meeting to seek feedback on the proposed project, which would take the two-lane road and require the state to purchase private property for right of way.

The project would include two 11-foot-wide inside lanes and one 14-foot-wide outside shared-use lane for cars and bikes on either side of a median. The road would be flanked by sidewalks on both sides.

The project would encompass 5.2 miles of the road between state highways 205 and 66. Construction is projected to begin in 2018 and wrap up in 2020. It is estimated to cost about \$58 million, said Michelle Bryant Raglon, spokeswoman for TxDOT.

James Sharp, who lives along a curve of FM552, said he stands to lose about 85 percent of his front yard in the current plan. That would mean losing two pastures and part of a pond. Sharp said a real estate agent told him the plan would significantly lower his property value.

"They say maybe in 25 years I could sell it commercially — 25 years. I might not be here," he said.

Sharp told a member of the engineering team that 19 vehicles have crashed in a nearby ditch or through his fence in the past eight years because the curve is dangerous.

The plan would bring cars closer to his home.

"I don't want a guardrail in my front yard," Sharp said. "This is like an abuse of money."

Resident Trish Blackburn, whose land wouldn't be affected by the plan, said she can understand residents' anger. She said she didn't understand why the road would need to be six lanes wide, but is OK with it because of the sidewalks.

"My kids go to the elementary school, and it's not far, but they can't walk there," Blackburn said.

Smaller scale sought

Residents Tammy and Josh Carmony said they hope to get the project significantly scaled down, if they can't grind the gears to a halt.

The couple said they would lose more than half of their front yard under the current plan, leaving them just 60 feet from the road.

Josh Carmony sent letters on April 1 to 42 other property owners along FM552 outlining grievances and urging residents to voice their concerns with TxDOT.

In the letter, he said that they believe other roads like State Highways 205 and 276, FM3549 and Horizon Road are more heavily traveled and need additional attention.

"With a little bit of diligence and collective effort, perhaps we can work together to protect our property and ensure a better future living along FM552," Carmony wrote in the letter.

Raglon said that two residential properties would be displaced and more than 100 parcels of land — which includes woods and residential and commercial properties — would be affected in some way under the current draft.

The proposal is based on the Rockwall County Thoroughfare Plan, which was originally adopted by the county Commissioners Court as a guide for developing transportation routes. It designates FM552 as a six-lane east-and-west “minor arterial,” as opposed to a “principal arterial” such as Highway 66 or 276. An arterial is a road primarily used for through traffic, according to TxDOT.

Commissioner David Magness said the North Central Texas Council of Governments drafted the thoroughfare plan based on input from the cities on the types and scale of the roads that would be needed.

But some residents in attendance said they see little pedestrian or car traffic on FM552 and that they wouldn’t want an expansion attracting more.

“It’s just a country road,” said resident Charlie Rose. “People move out here to move away from six-lane roads.”

‘Legitimate questions’

Funding would come from pooling federal, state and local funds, Magness said, but the price tag for the project is hefty.

Magness said that he understood the residents’ concerns but that the plan was adapted to meet future traffic needs.

“Everybody who’s been here tonight has legitimate questions and legitimate concerns. And as commissioners and as a Commissioners Court, we’re just trying to prepare the county for the future, and it’s difficult when the two meet,” he said.

Magness said officials need to find ways to reduce the scope of the project in a way that doesn’t interfere with widening the road in some capacity. He said that might mean simply improving major intersections and not doing anything to the road, or improving major intersections and rehabbing a portion of the road, which has been repaved in the past two years.

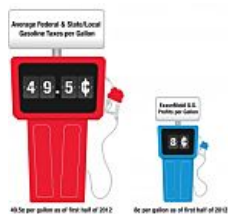
He also said there may be room to adjust the median, which received criticism from residents. He said the federal government requires sidewalks to be built if federal funds are used for the project.

“Certainly today [the sidewalk] doesn’t have a lot of support,” Magness said. “However, 20 years from now when Rockwall County is much more built out than it is today and there’s not much open space, there will be people who are riding bicycles, and families.

“The time to do that is when you’re building.”

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