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Craig Durrett: Inner Loop controversy to finally get a public airing

Shreveporters concerned about roadblocks to an Inner Loop extension will crowd into an air-conditioned theater at LSU-Shreveport on Thursday night to register their concerns. Perhaps a revival tent pitched at midday along a truck-clogged Flourney Lucas Road would provide a better setting for the ramifications of not extending the loop farther south.

Expressways aren't built in a day, but residents of homes and retirement centers along Flourney Lucas might never see relief from heavy industrial traffic because of perplexing decisions by local planning authorities. For now, the Inner Loop — or state Highway 3132 — ends at Flourney Lucas, where trucks heading to and from the Port of Shreveport-Bossier or servicing natural gas wells now travel instead of the former industrial route of Bert Kouns Industrial Loop.

For four decades, the community managed to execute a visionary plan to circle Shreveport-Bossier City with a controlled-access highway. It would also provide speedy access east and west for the Port of Shreveport-Bossier.

Then six years ago, with a loop three-quarters realized, decisions by the Shreveport Metropolitan Planning Commission (MPC) began allowing development in a one-time corridor. And today, a new development jeopardizes a preferred alternate.

So residents, developers, civic leaders, business interests and perhaps a state lawmaker or two will converge on LSUS on Thursday to consider the Inner Loop extension, as well as a side deal Shreveport Mayor Cedric Glover wants to cut with the state Department of Transportation and Development.

In exchange for allowing a new high-dollar subdivision access to state-controlled Flourney-Lucas at the point where the Inner Loop now ends, the city would assume maintenance of the soon-to-be five-lane road. The city would also be required to take into its inventory a portion of Ellerbe Road and the Inner Loop extension south of Bert Kouns.

The deal, embarrassingly close on the heels of a \$175 million bond election aimed at attacking backlogged maintenance projects for streets and sewers, requires approval by the City Council.

Those issues will be a focus of Thursday's hearing as council members consider what to do. But there are some other big-picture concerns the public also could raise about the integrity of our planning process:

- Various Inner Loop extension corridors were rejected and embraced over the years following a number of public forums. And yet the MPC and Northwest Louisiana Council of Governments abandoned and moved around potential corridors without similar public comment periods.
- A fact sheet chronicling a series of MPC meetings in 2004-05 that allowed one subdivision to expand into a one-time corridor contains notations that "There was no opposition present." Does it take "opposition" to keep a plan on track?

And, as southeast Shreveport Councilman Michael Corbin noted last week, a public notice concerning

the expansion of a subdivision might not generate much, if any, turnout. But who knows how many property owners and business interests might have shown up if the notice had mentioned the expansion would involve the abandonment and relocation of a proposed Inner Loop corridor?

- What's up with the "disconnect," as one planner termed it, among planning agencies? How does the Council of Governments staff consider a southerly path toward the future Interstate 69 the preferred corridor while developers, the MPC and even NLCOG's policy committee focus on an easterly route toward Louisiana Highway 1? Corbin is trying to determine just how many planning documents were in play.
- Is this the first failure of the \$1.65 million master plan? For one, the master plan transportation chapter didn't include the loop in its priorities. Instead, it focused more on redevelopment of neglected neighborhoods left behind by decades of residential and commercial sprawl — the downside of speedy interstates and metro loops.

As for master plan implementation, the City Council and the Caddo Commission still are considering whether to set up a master plan coordinator position.

What, if anything, would that staffer have contributed in avoiding this potential dead end to the Inner Loop? More obvious is how this planning controversy gives potency to the argument to locate the master plan coordinator outside the MPC.

Additional Facts

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