

PANEL SELECTS SINGLE I-49 CONNECTOR PLAN

Elevated design gets go-ahead despite lingering questions

CLAIRE TAYLOR

CTAYLOR@THEADVERTISER.COM

Despite unanswered questions from the community, the Interstate 49 Lafayette Connector executive committee decided Friday to move ahead with only one design option.

The 1.5-mile section of I-49 between roughly Pinhook Road and the railroad tracks, abutting the city's downtown and two historic neighborhoods, will be elevated.

Carlee Alm-Labar, Lafayette Consolidated Government's development director, was the only hold-out for continuing to study both the elevated and a semi-depressed, semi-covered option.

She was overridden by her boss, Mayor-President Joel Robideaux, and others on the executive committee, including Shawn Wilson, secretary of the Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development, and Monique Boulet, CEO of the Acadiana Planning Commission.

Robideaux, who asked few questions during Friday's meeting, said after considering how many more properties would be displaced by the semi-depressed version and hearing concerns from emergency personnel, he thinks the elevated version, called series 4, was the best option.

He, Alm-Labar and City-Parish Councilman Bruce Conque said the goal now is to work together with state highway officials and consultants to design the best elevated interstate possible.

"We've got an opportunity in front of us to get this project done," Robideaux said. "I'm convinced that we're going to be partners in it, work through whatever financial constraints exist and come out with something that we can all be proud of."

Wilson said he would rather pay to make one design option better than spend money on more study of two options.

Who exactly pays for what and how is a question that remains unanswered and one some in the community and a committee of volunteers wanted answers to before eliminating from further study the semidepressed option.

The Community Working Group, an advisory panel to the executive committee voted Wednesday to recommend both options be studied further as the design process moves into Tier 3. In December, that group was told both options would be studied further. They found out only a few weeks ago that was not the case.

"While I disagree that the process was perhaps short-circuited and circumvented," said Conque, who serves on the Community Working Group, "it's done and I'm going to remain optimistic that we can collaborate and work for the best interest of the community."

Conque said his fears about Lafayette having to pay to clean up contamination from the former railroad site or that it wouldn't be cleaned up were put to rest by Wilson.

During the committee meeting Friday, Wilson said DOTD will not obligate Lafayette to cleaning the contamination. It has to be cleaned and the entity responsible for the contamination must be held responsible, he said.

Some on the Community Working Group are concerned that amenities discussed as vital to making an elevated interstate acceptable to neighbors will have to be paid for locally. "We will guarantee that there will be the presence of some amenities," Wilson said.

Enhancements like a signature bridge can be discussed in Tier 3, said a "cautiously optimistic" Conque.

"We're going to have to track it very, very carefully and it's going to be the community's responsibility to make certain that they stay on point," he said. "I don't want to end up with what the traditional interstate looks like."

Plans have been in the works for decades to complete I-49 through Lafayette, along U.S. 90 to the New Orleans area. The project was dormant for years, but was resurrected in 2015.