

Lakeland considers roundabouts for U.S. 70

By Michael Waddell, Daily Memphian

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An image of Scenario A in a U.S. 70 corridor study, which features four roundabouts to improve safety and slow traffic. (Courtesy City of Lakeland)

A series of roundabouts along U.S. 70 could be in Lakeland's future as a way to slow traffic and reduce accidents.

The Lakeland Board of Commissioners along with the Municipal Planning and Design Review Commission held a special-called meeting on Tuesday, April 28 to approve a corridor study for the east-west highway through the heart of the city.

The study was formed from the Comprehensive Plan and Transportation Plan approved by the city in 2024, according to City Manager Emily Harrell.

"We did a lot of brainstorming imagining what can Highway 70 look like if we dream big," said James Robert Dearman, transportation engineer with OHM Advisors.

Mayor Josh Roman noted that the city was not adopting a plan on Tuesday for roundabouts, but only the next step in the process.

"This is to accept the study report done so that future planning can use this report in their decision-making process as well as a reference point," he said.

OHM's study outlines two scenarios to reduce speeds and improve safety along U.S. 70.

Scenario A includes four roundabouts along the corridor, including at Lakeland Town Square and Lakeland Preparatory School.

A 12-foot-wide multi-use path would run along the north side of the highway from the Bartlett city line to the Arlington town limits.

“What that does is it really connects those neighborhoods on the northeast side to the school,” said Mary Vavra, OHM planner landscape architect.

To the west, at Scotts Creek, the path could run under the highway, allowing people to safely cross there in a scenic setting.

An 18-foot wide median would be added through the length of the corridor.

Scenario B involves no roundabouts and less coverage for the multi-use path.

“The reason why we recommended Scheme A is because it addresses the main concern: safety,” Vavra said, explaining roundabouts are safer than signalized intersections, reducing fatalities by up to 90%. “You just can’t argue with the data. It’s incredible how much safer they are.”

The planners noted that Carmel, Indiana, has more than 150 roundabouts.

Resident Dave Loveland spoke against the roundabouts, citing cost and resident resistance.

“It appears to be about a \$100 million project over 20 to 30 years, of which Lakeland tax money will be paying at least \$20 million,” he said, adding that 74% of Lakeland residents surveyed opposed roundabouts.

MP/DRC chairman Jason Eaton lived through a transition to roundabouts in Maryland 30 years ago.

“I had two cars totaled on me at stop lights, and after the roundabouts went in I never even had a close call after that,” Eaton said. “It was a dramatic change.”

The study will also be used in applying for grants.

Part of the U.S. 70 corridor near the Lakeland Meadows development also falls within a Safe City TIF district approved by the Shelby County Commission last year.

“They approved that because they saw the need for safety on Highway 70,” Roman said.

Commissioner Jim Atkinson noted that the study is necessary for private developments like Heathfield, which will be expected to complete some of the road and trail work around their property.

“So the plan is hugely important, and I think it’s a long time coming to get down to this point,” he said.

Atkinson pushed for an amendment softening the language around specifically calling for roundabouts as the intersection improvement in all four cases, instead asking for them as an option in a case-by-case analysis for each intersection.

Lakeland has a roundabout in design at Seed Tick and Memphis-Arlington roads. Harrell estimates it could be open in about a year, as the city still needs to complete right-of-way acquisitions.



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