

Heartland Parkway could be a little closer

By James Roberts, Staff Writer
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The Kentucky Transportation Cabinet has released its recommended route for the proposed Heartland Parkway, though funding has still not been allocated for the project.

The Cabinet recommends widening the existing KY 55/US 68/KY 555 route from Columbia to Springfield.

"It makes official the premise we have been working on for several years and that is the four-laning of the present route of KY 55/555," said Kevin Sheilley, Team Taylor County executive director. "It removes any doubt regarding what the project is or where it will run."

The proposed 60-mile parkway will connect Adair, Taylor, Green, Marion and Washington counties by connecting the Louie B. Nunn Parkway at Columbia with the Martha Layne Collins Bluegrass Parkway at Springfield.

The Heartland Parkway project was launched by U.S. Rep. Ron Lewis more than five years ago.

Sheilley said Lewis and U.S. Rep. Ed Whitfield are working to secure funding for the estimated \$390 million project, which also includes bypasses around Columbia, Campbellsville and Lebanon. Lewis has stated that the parkway is his top priority, Sheilley said.

"This is a long-term project, so funding will inevitably come from a variety of sources before the project is complete," Sheilley said.

In 2004, transportation officials unveiled three options for the parkway during a round of public meetings in Campbellsville, Columbia, Lebanon and Springfield. Greensburg was later added to the project.

One option called for an all-new four-lane road. The second widened KY 55/U.S. 68/KY 555 to a four lane road. The third simply added one mile passing lanes every three miles along the road.

The four-lane road, which would have cost an estimated \$716 million, was to be built about 2 miles to the west of KY 55/U.S. 68/KY 555, according to Dan Byers of WMB Engineers.

Widening the existing route, option two, is expected to cost about \$367 million. Option three, adding the passing lanes, would have cost \$112 million.

Sheilley said plans are to build the parkway in phases, beginning with the section connecting Columbia to Campbellsville.

"Per the scoping study, this is the most heavily traveled and the section of the present route that is most in need of improvement," Sheilley said.

In July 2001, Lewis secured \$500,000 in federal funds to start the planning process. The money paid for feasibility, preliminary, engineering and environmental studies.

Officials believe the parkway would serve as an economic stimulus to Central Kentucky by opening up a more direct access to I-65 and I-75. In addition to increased business potential, the parkway would also provide more tourist opportunities by serving as the gateway to Green River Lake and the historic sites along the way, according to a release from the Heartland Parkway Task Force.

While Lewis and Whitfield are searching for funding, there are things that residents of the five counties can do to help.

"Continue to let Lewis and Whitfield know that you support the project, as well as letting our state leaders know how important this project is to our whole region," Sheilley said.

"Keeping the Heartland Parkway on their minds is one of our top missions. The more people who talk about the parkway, the higher the priority and the more funds that can be secured for the project."