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Leach Run Parkway moving forward

By Alex Bridges

The public can weigh in on the long-awaited Leach Run Parkway project this week.

The Front Royal-Warren County Economic Development Authority plans to hold a public input meeting for residents, property owners and anyone interested in the project that connects two, heavily traveled roads. The meeting will be held from 4-7 p.m. Wednesday at the Warren County Community Center, 538 Villa Ave., Front Royal.

The project calls for the construction of a four-lane highway divided by a median that connects Va. 55 (John Marshall Highway) to Happy Creek Road. The plans include bicycle and pedestrian facilities. Current estimates put the cost at \$12 million. The Virginia Department of Transportation would cover \$6 million. The county would pick up 66 percent of the remaining cost and the town 34 percent.

EDA Executive Director Jennifer McDonald said the meeting gives the community a chance to provide input into the design of the road and for the public to see how the project may affect property owners along the proposed path. Representatives from Pennoni, the engineering firm hired to design the project, will be on hand to answer questions and provide information about the parkway.

Surveyors for VDOT recently began placing targets with white markings of either "X" or "T" along Happy Creek Road, near the town's eastern border with Warren County. The markers aid surveyors who collect data while in airplanes over the site. Markings either are painted on the road or appear on vinyl sheets approximately 4 feet long and placed on the ground.

Surveyors plan to remove the temporary targets once they have completed the work.

VDOT asks people to not disturb the targets. VDOT engineers plan to use the survey results to assess terrain, drainage, utilities and other ground features in conjunction with future improvements to Happy Creek Road in the area of its prospective intersection with Leach Run Parkway.

Project manager Charlie Gardner said Friday the design work is in the early stages.

"The driving factor is going to be the Leach Run Parkway, and we've been asked to look at that intersection that would work with the Leach Run project," Gardner said. "That's our plan to go ahead and survey it so ... when the Leach Run project comes through, we will have enough information to do the proper connection."

The amount of work required for the intersection remains uncertain, Gardner said. The markings do not indicate the future alignment of the intersection or land that VDOT may acquire for the project.

"There may be enough work that's being done with this parkway that VDOT may or may not do anything with Happy Creek," Gardner said. "It all depends on what the traffic counts warrant."

The idea for the Leach Run Parkway dates back at least to the early 1990s. The first set of plans for the parkway was drawn up in 1991, McDonald said. Asked why the project has taken more than 20 years to reach this point, McDonald said it likely has as much to do with timing as funding.

"The timing worked out great," McDonald said. "When the EDA approached the town and county about this it was just good timing."

For the past two years, the EDA has been working with property owners to acquire space along the route needed for the construction of the project. Several rights-of-way remain outstanding, McDonald said. The EDA needs to acquire space on

a total of 20 parcels, several of which lie along John Marshall Highway. But McDonald explained that most of the rights-of-way would serve as temporary construction easement or slope-maintenance easements and not require the EDA to buy the property. The contractor will, in some cases, need to grade these easements to make them line up with the road as designed.

"All we're asking for is that easement to make that property look better and align with the road because we don't want someone to have a piece of property and then there'd be a big drop off," McDonald said. "We're trying to do it the right way to where their property values will not be impacted."

McDonald explained that the easements would not be used to park vehicles or store materials for the project. The EDA will need to acquire space from at least two large parcels -- 2.4 acres of land owned by Heptad LLC, also known as the Swan Farm, and 3.5 acres from land owned by Warren County Memorial Hospital.

Once the EDA holds the public input meeting, McDonald said the agency hopes to come up with a final design by the end of March or early April. The EDA would then seek bids from construction firms to build the project in June. Once the EDA awards a contract McDonald said the project likely would take approximately 18 months to complete. McDonald said the construction shouldn't affect motorists except at times when the contractor works on the parkway's connections to Happy Creek Road or John Marshall Highway.

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