

*From Arkansas Online*

# Pick I-30 Priorities, Little Rock Board Counseled

Chelsea Boozer | May 24, 2016

The width of a new Interstate 30 bridge over the Arkansas River isn't as important as other design aspects of the Arkansas Highway and Transportation Department's 30 Crossing project, consultants advised the Little Rock Board of Directors on Monday.

Consultants with Nelson/Nygaard and Gateway Planning presented their recommendations to the board after three months of studying what the city should ask for out of the project in order to protect its downtown and encourage continued economic development. The consultants told board members that the city must choose which design aspects of the project it wants to stand firm on.

The Highway Department's 30 Crossing project is a plan to improve a 6.7-mile corridor of Interstate 30 through downtown Little Rock and North Little Rock, including replacing the I-30 bridge over the Arkansas River.

There's been much debate about the width the new bridge will be, with proposals to expand the current six lanes to eight or 10.

But Paul Moore with Nelson/Nygaard told city directors that they shouldn't be so concerned with that debate.

"There are seldom home runs in my business. Almost everything is a trade-off," Moore said. "The width across the river, at least from downtown's perspective, is really not that critical or not the most critical aspect. From AHTD's perspective, you are going to build a bridge like this once every 75 years or so. It's pretty logical they aren't going to underbuild it in terms of width."

Instead, the city should focus on getting a written contract with the Highway Department that ensures design aspects that will affect downtown and development there.

Moore recommended that east-west connectivity should remain and be expanded. For example, he said the overpasses at East Sixth and East Ninth streets should have additional width that allows for landscaped buffers and sidewalks on both sides of the driving lanes to make drivers and pedestrians feel like they are still downtown, not just crossing an interstate.

He also suggested that the city ask for certain design features at underpasses, such as lighting, and that speeds on collector-distributor lanes be low enough to encourage safe in-city driving.

The city paid Nelson/Nygaard and Gateway Planning \$75,770 for their work.

The 30 Crossing project has four design options under consideration.



*Photographs by handout - Ark Highway Department*

*Special to the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette - 10-13-2015 - The Interstate 30 interchange serving downtown Little Rock as it looks today.*

Two of the options have six through lanes on Interstate 30 with two additional lanes in each direction in the vicinity of the Arkansas River bridge to separate local traffic from the through lanes. The additional lanes are called collector-distributor lanes.

The four alternatives differ in the location of an interchange to serve downtown Little Rock. Two alternatives have a new interchange configuration at Cantrell Road, where the interchange is now. The other two move it south and use East Fourth and East Sixth streets and East Capitol Avenue to allow traffic to enter and leave downtown.

Two alternatives include those interchange options but have eight through lanes.

Moore said the city should ask that the collector-distributor lanes leading traffic to downtown be designed with a boulevard feel -- with sidewalks, trees and streetlights.

The Highway Department is taking public comment on its proposed alternatives through June 10. At the same time, the alternatives are being evaluated under an environmental assessment process that is designed to produce a preferred alternative later this year.

After pulling together all of the city board's input from Monday's work session, the city-hired consultants plan to draft a report to file with the Highway Department that articulates the city's stance and requests.

"There needs to be a written agreement between the city and Highway Department that says that these items are required and in order for them to be realized, the city does have the ability to make sure that during the design-build process, that if there is a vital engineering question -- in other words, things get more expensive ... we need to make sure that these things are not lost in the value engineering process," said Scott Polikov with Gateway Planning.

Polikov made clear that there's no state or federal law that would require the Highway Department to agree to a memorandum of understanding with the city, but he said that it would be advantageous to the agency to do so. Little Rock government has no say over the state agency, but it does have some political sway.

Polikov also said it would be easier on all parties if everyone were on the same page when the design gets small alterations throughout the process, and that a written agreement would accomplish that.

While the design of six through lanes with collector-distributor lanes has attracted support from the business community, some project critics reject all four alternatives, saying that widening the I-30 corridor would harm downtown Little Rock, which has enjoyed a renaissance in recent years.

The Highway Department has requested \$631.7 million in state funding for the 30 Crossing project.

In addition to the Little Rock Board of Directors hiring a consultant, the Arkansas Public Policy Panel also hired an outside consultant to review the proposals. The panel is an advocacy group that was founded in the early 1960s to foster school integration and is long associated with other community causes. The cost of its study has not been disclosed.

Consultant Norman Marshall presented his review to the city board last week, calling all four alternatives bad and recommending a boulevard approach instead. The majority of board members didn't see eye-to-eye with Marshall's recommendations.

Some in the business community have publicly supported the Highway Department's plans.

Earlier this month, Cromwell Architects Engineers, which initially opposed the department's I-30 corridor project, signaled its support for the 10-lane alternative that moves the Cantrell Road interchange to the south and adds an interchange using East Fourth and East Sixth streets and East Capitol Avenue.

The 3rd Street Merchants Associations also endorsed the proposed alternative earlier this month, joining the Downtown Little Rock Partnership, the Little Rock Regional Chamber of Commerce, the Central Arkansas Library System and the Clinton School of Public Service, among others.

Nelson/Nygaard is familiar with the city through its work with Rock Region Metro. The company received \$399,000 from the Pulaski County transit agency to develop a strategic plan. The plan resulted in recommendations to upgrade transit service throughout the county and to ask voters to approve a one-fourth percent countywide sales tax devoted to transit

to help pay for the improvements. Voters rejected the increase in the March 1 primary election.

Little Rock City Manager Bruce Moore told the board at the conclusion of Monday's work session that the next steps are getting the city's comments prepared to present to the Highway Department before the June 10 cutoff, and working toward a memorandum of understanding with the agency.

"Before the project moves forward, the Highway Department and city would need to enter into an agreement that says what's important to us and the things we must stand firm on and some of the things we want to see enhanced in the project," he said.

Information from this article was contributed by Noel Oman of the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette.