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Madison County OKs funds for I-55 plan

Transportation official says he will continue to fight interchange

ELIZABETH CRISP • ELIZABETH.CRISP@CLARIONLEDGER.COM • FEBRUARY 5, 2008

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Madison County officials on Monday approved financing for an I-55 interchange just north of Madison, but the transportation official who repeatedly has blocked the Reunion Parkway project is not backing down.

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County supervisors approved a \$33 million bond issue for road projects but will not know until this summer if a tax increase will be needed to cover the bond.

At least one supervisor said the bond could lead to a 3.5- to 4.5-millage increase - the largest increase the county has experienced in some time.

District 3 Supervisor D.I. Smith, the only supervisor to vote against the road bond, said a tax increase would be necessary for the county to balance the deficit budget and bond debt-service costs.

"The alternative is devastation of other essential programs we have grown accustomed to," he said.

County administrator Donnie Caughman said it's "way too early to tell" if the county will need a tax increase to cover the bond. Officials likely will not know until July, he said.

More than half of the bond has been dedicated to the proposed Reunion interchange. Madison County officials have touted the interchange as a way to ease traffic congestion and provide opportunities for economic development. A sports complex and hospital have been talked about for the parkway.

But Central District Transportation Commissioner Dick Hall twice has blocked the project by not approving findings of an environmental study. He said Monday his position is the same.

Hall has questioned the county's method of funding the project and the push to build an interchange before improving the existing one at Gluckstadt.

MDOT Commissioners Wayne Brown and Bill Minor on Jan. 8 voted in favor of the Reunion interchange, but a unanimous vote is needed to begin work. The project is expected to go before MDOT commissioners again next week.

The interchange is expected to cost about \$40 million. Landowners have donated all the right-of-way property.

The bond issue Monday allotted \$17.5 million toward the interchange and \$10 million toward additional work on the parkway. MDOT has committed to paying \$6.5 million on the interchange.

Another \$6 million has been pledged by a private entity. Board of Supervisors President Tim Johnson of District 2 would not name the donor or disclose details about that deal.

While Hall was a bit more optimistic about the project after hearing about possible private funding, he said he still is not likely to approve the interchange.

"It makes it go down a little easier, but I don't like unknowns," he said. "I want to know who it is and see something in writing."

Hall suggested the county enter into a Highway Enhancement through Local Partnerships, or HELP, bond to fund the Gluckstadt interchange, before starting work on Reunion.

"If they truly want to help the traffic problem, they should move forward with the plans for Gluckstadt," he said.

Gluckstadt is on the MDOT schedule for 2014, but transportation officials have promised Madison County the interchange can be moved up to 2010, Johnson said.

Through the HELP program, the county initially would fund the Gluckstadt interchange and work would begin immediately, but MDOT would pay back the cost on a scheduled basis beginning in 2014, Hall said.

"When Gluckstadt is done, then we can start looking at Reunion," he said.

Johnson disagreed with that proposal, saying it would tack several years onto the Reunion project's completion date.

The county's current plan calls for the Reunion interchange to be completed in about two years.

"We can't afford to wait eight or 10 years for this," Johnson said.

To comment on this story, call Elizabeth Crisp at (601) 942-9019.

ROAD PLAN

Madison County supervisors approved a \$33 million bond issue for road projects. It is the third phase in a \$50 million bond project.

Road projects financed by the bond include:

- \$17.5 million: Reunion Parkway interchange.
- \$10 million: Reunion Parkway.
- \$3 million: Gluckstadt widening project.
- \$2.5 million: General road maintenance.

For a complete list of planned road upgrades, visit [clarionledger.com](#).

WHAT'S NEXT

The Reunion Parkway interchange is expected to go before Mississippi Department of Transportation commissioners at their Feb. 12 meeting.

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rolyat wrote:

Sounds like we need a recall on the recent Madison County Board of Supervisors elections- Why not make the proposed Reunion Parkway a Toll Road and collect the necessary money to fund the project that way? The users would pay to use it. A tax increase to fund it is stupid.

2/5/2008 6:50:47 PM

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Huckleberry wrote:

Simply put -- Madison County can get a much needed new Reunion interchange and Highway 463 to 51 corridor in a couple of years under the Madison County Supervisors' plan, or we can attempt to get more funds from the federal and state bureaucracies and, assuming that effort is successful, get the new interchange in 10 or 15 years. What is best for Madison County is for MDOT to move the Gluckstadt reconstruction up from 2014 to 2010 and for Dick Hall to quit blocking completion of Reunion Parkway and interchange. Madison County needs more roads NOW!

2/5/2008 10:29:33 AM

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mmboo wrote:

Right on trishbb. It is one thing if the people of Reunion, St. Dominic, & the sports complex want to cover the costs on this, but a 3.5 to 4.5 mil increase for the entire county is completely stupid for an interchange. That is why we pay state and federal taxes...for roads. Why don't the supervisors work with MDOT rather than going up against them? Fix what we have first (Gluckstadt) rather than building more.

2/5/2008 7:24:51 AM

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trishbb wrote:

I am a Madison County resident and a tax payer. I think this issue of building a new exit for Reunion should be voted on by the residents, after all, we will be the ones paying for it. I live many miles (28) from the nearest exit to the interstate but the officials dont seem to be concerned about things like that. I tried coming through Gluckstadt a couple weeks ago and thought I would never get to the exit ramp to get on 55. I am sure I am not the only resident of the county that would like to see something done at Gluckstadt before anything else is done for the interchanges. After all, when people move to Reunion they know all about the traffic and the interchanges.

2/5/2008 5:53:16 AM

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