

County officials get answers about bypass delay

Written by George Browning

Friday, 11 December 2009 00:00 - Last Updated Friday, 11 December 2009 12:52

County council President Mark Manship and Lana Sullivan, president of the county commissioners, met with representatives from the Indiana Department of Transportation last Thursday (Dec. 10) seeking answers for the delay of the bypass project in Salem.

Work on the project was expected to begin in the coming months and local officials recently learned that the project start date had been pushed to 2017.

In the meeting, Sullivan and Manship were told that the actual new start date is 2015.

Sullivan was glad she got answers, but admits to being frustrated with the recent turn of events.

"It's very easy to get discouraged, but because of the work that has been put into this project, I refuse to believe it's not going to happen," she said. "The amount of money that we've paid and the work we've put in on a local level, I'm not going to say it's not going to happen.

"If I give up, what about everybody else? There are a lot of non-believers out there anyway, and rightfully so, but I am not going to give up because that will give everyone else the right to give up."

Sullivan is not the only local official frustrated by the news.

Salem Mayor David Bower said the news is similar to the state's recent fund cutting for the proposed air port project.

"The state sends written confirmation that they are going to fund so much and then in the 11th hour of the project they reduce funding," he said. "I don't think that's fair. You can't do that in the real world."

The long and short of the Dec. 10 meeting contained both good and bad news for the county.

The bad news is that the bypass project has been pushed back six years. The good news is that INDOT can move the project back to the forefront of its list of projects at any time.

"The priority of the project can be changed," Sullivan said. "We left the meeting feeling somewhat positive because they gave us a glimmer of hope that just because it's 2015 now, it can be bumped up. In order to get it bumped up they agreed to help us and support us and they asked us to do a couple of things, as well."

Sullivan said the county is going to draw up a plan stating why the project is so important as far as economic development purposes and removing the traffic off the square.

"Then we are going to forward the plan to the people we met with and then send it on to Indianapolis," she said. "Our fear is that they don't understand why this project is important. We do, because we've worked on it, but when you work on as many projects as they are, this one is just another one in the system."

Those attending the meeting with Sullivan and Manship were Jim Stark Commissioner of the Seymour District, Marvin Jenkins from INDOT's public relations department, An engineer on the project Jim Ude and local project coordinator Brandi Fischvogt.

Besides the glimmer of hope, Sullivan was satisfied with some of the answers she received and others, not so much.

The reason the project date has been pushed to 2015 is due to Major Moves Funding. Sullivan said they were informed that the criteria used when INDOT evaluated each project was safety, road conditions, the actual need for construction and they also looked at specific corridors.

Members of the Major Moves Committee and other people selected by Governor Mitch Daniels to review the projects were the ones who made the decision.

That sparked another question for Sullivan. She wanted to know why the bypass went from

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being a federally funded project to one that's funded by Major Moves.

"If it was Federal, the outcome may have been different and they never really could answer that question," Sullivan said. "I asked them to please, please, please get me an answer to that."

Another pressing question is why local officials weren't notified of the change and had to learn about it from outside sources.

Sullivan said Stark admitted to a communication breakdown and took full responsibility.

"I told them how difficult it was to handle on a local level without hearing it directly from the horse's mouth," Sullivan said. "We did ask that any other changes in regard to this project be handled differently. They assured us that they would."

Sullivan also questioned the money that has already been spent locally. She estimates more than \$1 million having already being spent and she wanted to know with the delay what costs were going to be involved between now and 2015.

"They said the design would have to be reviewed and the permits will expire so we have to get new permits," Sullivan said. "I wanted to know who is going to foot that expense," she said. "The county has already paid for that stuff once and it's not fair for us to pay for it again. They told me they presume that INDOT will cover the cost."

Sullivan said the county will get that in writing as the process moves forward.

She also brought up a contract the county has signed with INDOT. She said representatives weren't aware that it even existed.

"A contract is useless if one party is going to follow it and the other is not," she said. "Here is what they told me, 'We have a contract with you?'"

Sullivan had the contract and left them with a copy.

She said the contract spells out the county's responsibility as far as what has been paid out on the design, the fact that the county pays nothing toward the construction cost, and that the county is responsible for a certain percentage of the dig.

Sullivan is hoping the work being done will help the bypass get started sooner. She urged residents to contact their local legislators and stress the importance of the project.

Another meeting has been set for later this month with Sullivan, Manship and the Commissioner of INDOT.