

TDOT officials ask for scaled-back plans

State: Projects are backlogged until 2040

By Chas Sisk
The Tennessean

State transportation officials are asking local governments to scale back their plans, an effort that could make it harder for Metro Nashville to win state dollars for the Amp bus rapid transit project.

Commissioner John Schroer said Monday that the state department of transportation hopes to reduce its nearly \$8.5 billion backlog of projects by working with local governments to come up with less ambitious alternatives. The effort is meant to get long-delayed projects off the ground at a time when the state faces less revenue from gas taxes and the possible loss of some federal funding for highway maintenance.

The state's new approach toward funding for local projects comes at the same time that Metro officials are trying to secure funding for the \$174 million Amp. The city's initial budget called for \$35 million in state funds, along with \$75 million from the federal government, \$59 million from city sources and \$5 million from the Metropolitan Planning Organization.

Schroer described the initiative to Gov. Bill Haslam at a hearing on the Department of Transportation's \$1.8 billion budget proposal for next year.

Schroer said that un-

less the department changes its approach, it could not complete the projects officials already have committed to until 2040. This backlog has been building up gradually as the state has completed planning and acquired right-of-way without having the money to start construction.

Schroer said he has ruled out issuing bonds, noting that Tennessee is one of only five states with no transportation debt. Schroer added that gasoline taxes are expected to slide as cars become more fuel-efficient and more people move into urban areas.

With no new sources of revenue expected, officials have begun to look for ways to scale back, Schroer said. This year, the department convinced five local governments to accept smaller projects than they expected in exchange for immediate funding.

Schroer cited the West Tennessee city of Bolivar, where officials have agreed to a plan for a bypass that is smaller than the ring road that was proposed originally.

Schroer did not mention the Amp. Some opponents, including car dealer and major Republican fundraiser Lee Beaman, sat in the audience behind him wearing "Stop Amp" stickers as he gave his presentation.

Speaking to reporters afterward, Haslam said the backlog shows how tight transportation funding is in Tennessee.

"The Amp is going to have to compete with a lot of other very necessary projects across the state," he said.



Schroer says the state is trying to reduce its backlog of projects. FILE

Money for transportation could become tighter next fall. According to Schroer, a federal law used to determine how much money states receive for highways is set to expire Sept. 30, 2014. Unless the law is reauthorized, federal funding for highways would fall by nearly \$50 billion, a "fiscal sinkhole" that Schroer said would blow a hole in the state's highway budget.

Schroer said he does not expect Congress to reach an agreement on highway funding before money dries up. He noted that lawmakers had been unable to reach an agreement on sequestration before it began earlier this year and that many members of Congress believe states should reduce their dependency on the federal government.

The Department of Transportation is preparing a second budget, Schroer said, on the assumption that the bill will not be reauthorized in time.

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