

Loop work goes on

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By Alice Dowty

LIVINGSTON - Two groups are working independently on the possibility of a Baton Rouge bypass to reduce Interstate 12 traffic, but only one group has state funding, said State Rep. Dale Erdey.

Consultants hired to work on the "Loop" are still spending the last of a \$4 million state appropriation on a plan that has been discarded by three parish presidents, local lawmakers and constituents in the affected areas, Erdey said.

"The traffic hasn't gone away," Erdey said. "The problem is still here. And the local legislative delegation is still working toward an acceptable solution."

Erdey is part of the 26-member Capital Region Legislative Delegation, which has already been successful getting funds to widen Interstate 12 to Walker.

But Loop consultants are not using their funds to help develop CRLD ideas, Erdey said. Mike Bruce with ABMB Engineers Inc., a long-time spokesman for the Loop project, could not be reached for comment.

According to an implementation timetable on the Loop website (brloop.com), a route through Livingston Parish should have been selected a year ago.

Erdey said the Loop consultants should have been under the direction of the Department of Transportation and Development.

"They should be reporting to DOTD," Erdey said.

Instead, Loop consultants, who still have nearly \$500,000 to draw on, report to the Capital Area Expressway Authority (CAEA), Erdey said.

Three of the five parish presidents serving on the CAEA Board, including Livingston Parish President Mike Grimmer, resigned last April. The remaining board members are East Baton Rouge Parish Mayor-President Kip Holden, West Baton Rouge Parish President Riley "Peewee" Berthelot, and DOTD Secretary Sherri LeBas.

Grimmer said he had tried to find a route acceptable to residents and to Loop planners, but the planners did not pay much attention to the CAEA Board.

Erdey said he also had difficulty working with Loop consultants.

"We tried to sit down with them, but they refused to listen," Erdey said. "The routes through Central and Watson stayed up on the website. Even after they said the Loop wouldn't go through Central, the maps didn't change."

Port Vincent Mayor Laura Savoy and French Settlement Mayor Toni Guitrau had similar experiences with Loop routes that went through their villages.

After an area has been developed, finding new rights-of-way for a by-pass may be impossible, Erdey said.

"The time to get the land is before development comes to an area," Erdey said. "But that doesn't mean we stop working on the problem. And anybody who has been caught on I-12 when there's a wreck knows we need new alternative routes."

Erdey said a possible solution might be found by developing existing rights-of-way and building a new bridge over the Amite River.

Loop planners are looking for a route to take traffic from I-12 east of Walker in a northwesterly direction across Watson to the Amite River. The Loop would have a new bridge across the river and intersect I-110 in the vicinity of the Baton Rouge Municipal Airport, according to an interview with Bruce in January 2010.

Grimmer tried to get Loop planners to accept a route through undeveloped timberland, east of Walker and north of Watson.

The most northerly route (N-12) shown on Loop maps cuts through Watson in the vicinity of Easterly Lakes subdivision.

The N-11 option would cut through a more densely populated area, including the new Live Oak High School site.

The third possibility (N-10) on the Loop map of options follows La. 1025 (Arnold Road) between La. 447 (north of US 190) and La. 16 in Watson.

N-10 would pass the Judson Baptist Church area.