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Transportation alliance reviews long-range highway plans

By Amy Karpinsky , Herald-Standard

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The Fayette County Transportation Alliance Thursday reviewed a list of important highway projects that will be included in the county's long-range plan with the Southwestern Planning Commission.

Among the projects is the installation of a full diamond interchange at the Walnut Hill exit of Route 119 near the Uniontown Shopping Center. The half-diamond interchange has been in existence for about 30 years.

There are three other items listed under new construction including the construction of a new Alicia Heights Road in Luzerne Township near SCI-Fayette, the maximum-security prison, which is slated to open this fall. The road will be named Faeco Drive, after the Fayette Expressway Completion Organization, a group that is working toward completion of the Mon/Fayette Expressway.

Matthew Drive Extension, from New Salem Road to Route 40 in South Union Township, is also included. The road will access the Fayette County Business Park and adjoining development.

Finally, the 12-mile Uniontown-to-Brownsville link of the Mon/Fayette Expressway is listed for a new capacity project.

Chuck DiPietro of the SPC, a regional transportation alliance that the county joined last year, said the projects included in the long-range plan are an overview of the what the county wants to have in place by the year 2030.

Each of the nine counties and the city of Pittsburgh in the SPC must have a long-range highway plan. Before it is adopted, there will be a 30-day public comment period for the plan.

DiPietro said the long-range plan, which will be formally adopted by the SPC in June, is now in draft form.

"It is a vision of projects we would like to build if we find the money," he said.

The list includes new capacity or new construction, widening/capacity upgrade for widening existing roads and adding capacity and non-capacity upgrades which are other projects.

The start figure for the county's list was \$683 million, although by the end of

the meeting the figure had grown to nearly \$700 million.

DiPietro said realistically that the county may only be able to list \$500 million in projects, so some paring down may be necessary.

In keeping with the ratio that the federal government accepts, the plan calls for 23 percent for new construction and 77 percent for capital maintenance.

Other upgrade projects listed in the plan include widening Matthew Drive to four lanes from Route 21 to New Salem Road; widening New Salem Road from Matthew Drive to Route 40 and various improvements along Route 21, including construction of a new Masontown Bridge and improvements on three sections that stretch from Masontown to Route 40.

Major county roads, such as Route 119, Route 40, Route 711 and Route 51, were also addressed in the plan.

"Being in the plan shows the state the direction we want to move," DiPietro said.

He said the plan should keep some of the items general so they don't have to be changed later. An example of that generality is a blanket line item for Fayette County intersection safety improvements.

State Department of Transportation engineer Mike Dufalla said it is better to keep the items general so changes don't have to be made later.

His comments came after county transportation consultant William Piper suggested that a line item for a betterment of Route 40 from Route 21 to Duck Hollow Road should be kept as a separate item, instead of being included in the general Fayette County betterment line item. Piper said it is a high profile project.

Dufalla said if the cost of the project changes, it could cause problems with leaving it in the plan. DiPietro said wanting to have everything on the plan may not be possible due to cost constraints. "We want to have vision, but a little bit of discipline will help," he said.

In a separate matter, DiPietro said the way that Fayette County handled the public participation panel in the past was commendable and will be used as an example for the other counties. He said if the county commissioners appoint or reappoint the members soon, the county will likely be the first to have a panel in place.

Luzerne Township supervisor Ron DeSalvo said a spokesman from SCI-Fayette wishes to speak at the next meeting of the alliance, to stress the importance of completing the roads around the prison when it opens. The facility will hold 2,000 inmates and employ 680 people.

Alliance chairperson Tammy Shell said the prison spokesman can speak at the March meeting of the alliance.

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