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Municipalities partner with developer for highway improvements

By Paul Sunyak, Herald-Standard
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Plans to open the New Salem Road corridor to development are inching forward, with Fayette County and South Union Township officials agreeing to partner financially with Widewaters Development Inc. of New York to fund highway improvements.

Widewaters, which wants to build a new Super Wal-Mart store on one side of New Salem Road near Route 40, is willing to pay \$1.5 million to \$2 million for needed highway improvements in that area, according to South Union Township Supervisor Robert Schiffbauer.

However, county transportation consultant William Piper pegs the estimated total cost for those improvements at \$10 million. That projection leaves a funding gap of \$8 million, which the other entities in the partnership have agreed to fill using a host of possible sources in a likely multi-year time frame.

The Fayette County Redevelopment Authority, which is developing a 277-acre business park on the other side of New Salem Road at the behest of the county commissioners, is one of those partners.

"All of the partners will share in the overall costs," said Raymond C. Polaski, the authority's executive director. "Staging this thing (over a period of years) is a possibility, rather than doing it all at one time."

Terry McMillen, who works as authority engineer and whose firm is one of the first tenants in the fledging Fayette County Business Park, said that part of the reason for the partnership

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had to do with common sense and basic fairness.

McMillen said that since the roadways in the area are already near capacity, the first developer to press forward with a concrete plan would incur the entire cost of upgrading the road system to PennDOT's satisfaction. Such a scenario, said McMillen, would mean that the other developer - either Widewaters or the redevelopment authority - would essentially get a free ride.

"The downside is, whoever does it first pays for the other side, or at least 90 percent of it," said McMillen. "To reduce everyone's cost, it simply made more sense for (everyone) to come back and join the partnership."

Added Schiffbauer, "I think it's a package that's very workable."

He said that U.S. Rep. John Murtha (D-Johnstown) - who is poised to represent the area in question should he win re-election in November - has identified the project as his "No. 1" transportation priority in Fayette County.

Basically, the partnership plans to cobble together a funding package from old and new sources, starting with any federal money that congressional veteran Murtha can steer their way. Polaski said the redevelopment authority could tap an additional \$1 million in county bond money and is willing to plow the proceeds from land sales back into developing the remainder of its business park.

The county commissioners are also earmarking a yearly \$250,000 Appalachian Regional Commission grant to park development, said Polaski, who added that South Union Township will commit more of its annual Community Development Block grant money to the project as needed.

A new source of money could be the state Redevelopment Capital Assistance Program, where state Sen. Richard A. Kasunic (D-Dunbar) has put in a \$2 million request, said Polaski, who added that Pennsylvania's new governor might also unveil new programs that could help.

Piper, who is going to be the township's project manager for this project, said that for the first time the county is trying to get Appalachia Access Road money, shooting for more than \$100,000 from a statewide pot of \$750,000 to \$1 million.

"It's literally been an untapped source," said Schiffbauer.

Piper added that another potential funding source is the Southwest Pennsylvania Commission, a regional planning entity of which Fayette County is now a full-fledged member.

"Fayette County is not working alone. They're working with the region now," said Piper.

It's a foregone conclusion that approximately one mile of New Salem Road will at some point need expanded from two to four lanes, said Piper. He said that one interesting option would be to relocate the last leg of New Salem Road, taking it from existing Matthew Drive and bending it through the county's business park to a hookup with Duck Hollow Road.

Under that scenario, the township would take over the abandoned spur from Matthew Drive to Route 40, said Piper. Polaski said that one advantage to that scenario would be that a four-lane road could be built with no property right-of-way costs, as the redevelopment authority is poised to donate the land needed for that purpose.

An interesting development has already taken place on the Duck Hollow Road side of the park, said Schiffbauer, who noted the Pennsylvania Turnpike Commission has agreed to run a Mon-Fayette Expressway interchange connector across Route 40 and up to the park's western border.

Schiffbauer said that PennDOT District 12-0 is "very close" to concluding its review of the Widewaters traffic study. McMillen said the delay in completing that review - which began in January - was not the fault of PennDOT.

Schiffbauer said the traffic plan under review calls for accommodating increased traffic flows taking into account a 210,000-square-foot Widewaters Phase 1 development and an additional 100,000 square feet of development in the county business park.

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