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By ROBERT PIERCE • Leader & Times Plans to four lane some local portions of U.S. Highway 54 are now in the design phase of planning.

On May 22 and 23, the Kansas Department of Transportation hosted two public information open houses at Liberal's Rock Island Depot and at Southwestern Heights High School, respectively, to share the state's preferred concept of the U.S.-54 expansion project.

Those plans call for engineering design work to be constructed as far east as the junction of Hwy. 54 to U.S. Highway 160 east of Plains.

Jack Taylor, director of the Southwest Passage Initiative for Regional Interstate Transportation, said KDOT officials have been responding to concerns of local citizens following public meetings in 2012.

"They have now included a westbound bridge across the Cimarron River, a new intersection accommodating traffic north on Panhandle Road plus a half mile of divided four lane east past the new bridge," Taylor said.

This project will be divided into three phases with the first phase being from Salley Road to Arkalon Road.

"The route will be straightened out some, and a new, safer intersection will be built near the ethanol plant to accommodate the trucks going into and out of that plant and make it much safer for them and all other drivers," Taylor said.

The second phase will be from Arkalon Road to a half mile east of the river, and the third phase will be from Salley Road going toward Liberal. Taylor said some intersections will be closed, with access roads built to allow entrance to all homes and the Western Star RV Ranch.

"New intersections will be built with a 90-degree angle to U.S. Highway 54," he said. "This will be safer for drivers exiting or accessing these crossings. The primary concern in this preferred concept is for safety of the drivers."

The price tag for construction on the project is \$69 million and is scheduled to start in 2016. Taylor said this will allow people to voice opinions or concerns to KDOT about this preferred concept.

"We have found that they will listen to our concerns and accommodate them where they can and still maintain the integrity of the project," he said.

Another concept voiced at the recent public meetings was the engineering and design work which had been planned to go from the river bridge to the Meade/Seward county line, just west of Plains. Taylor said that has now been extended to go past Plains to U.S.-160.

“The actual construction on this section will be done when additional funding is available – either through the state or the federal government,” he said.

Steve Rockers, road design leader with KDOT, said the projects came as a result of local meetings in fall of 2012.

“We were here last fall,” he said. “We had one project. After last fall’s meeting, we went back to Topeka and worked, and now, we have three different projects. One at the ethanol plant, one at the river crossing and one closer to Liberal. We’re showing folks what these new projects are and the schedule.”

Rockers said after meeting with local leaders, KDOT is now ready to move into the design phase of the project. He said the features of the work include a wide grass median and a four-lane expressway.

“We’re squaring up several of the side roads to make it more of a 90-degree angle, so you have a better sight distance,” he said. “Increasing some of the separation at locations between the railroad and 54 so there’s better gaps between the highway and the railroad, making a lot of improvements at the ethanol plant. At the river, we heard about taking the curves out. We’re showing the new bridge for the westbound traffic on the north side and taking that existing curve out as you head east to west.”

Rockers said a project has been in the works for a while, and KDOT is working to accelerate plans to have the project let by January of 2016.

“There was the ethanol project that has been out there, going on longer than this project,” he said. “That one has been rolled into this project.”

The U.S.-54 project is part of KDOT’s Transportation Works for Kansas program, and Rockers said the money earmarked for the project is still safe.

“It’s still part of the state budget,” he said.

Rockers said work on the ethanol project would likely start by the summer of 2016 and finish by 2018, with the other projects to follow.

“The river bridge by the Samson, it would start construction in spring of 2018, as would the project from Garrettsville out to the ethanol plant,” he said. “Those book end projects would be constructed at the same time in the 2018, 2019 summers.”

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