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PennDOT earmarks \$450,000 for South Union road studies

By Paul Sunyak, Herald-Standard
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PennDOT is earmarking an extra \$450,000 to fund preliminary engineering and studies to upgrade Matthew Drive and New Salem Road, a move that delights Tammy Shell, director of the Fayette County Planning, Zoning and Community Development Office.

"We finally got to the finish line of the marathon," said Shell, referring to the county commissioners' desire to make a higher priority of developing that area of South Union Township. "Obviously, PennDOT was willing to work with us and they proved it."

In a recent letter authored by Michael H. Dufalla, district engineer for PennDOT District 12-0, the county was informed that a \$150,000 preliminary engineering study was added for Matthew Drive. Dufalla also wrote that \$300,000 was allotted for preliminary studies on upgrading New Salem Road to four lanes from Matthew Drive to Route 40, and for upgrading Route 40 between Duck Hollow Road and Route 21.

"That's what the commissioners asked for. That was their request," said Dufalla on Wednesday. "We've always worked with (the county). It just takes time. We've got to sort all this stuff out. It's still not official until the governor signs off on the 12-year plan in July. But at least they're on the list."

Dufalla said the Federal Highway Administration must also sign off on the list in October, but the critical component as always is money. He said that PennDOT must receive adequate funding in the state's capital budget in order for any project to proceed.

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Both projects recently added to the list are consistent with the commissioners' wishes as well as those of the South Union Township supervisors. Supervisor Bob Schiffbauer, who joined Commissioners Sean M. Cavanagh and Vincent A. Vicites in lobbying to make the area a higher priority, was also pleased with PennDOT's decision.

"They've done something that, prior to this, was not even considered on the 'wish list' (comprised) of many projects," said Schiffbauer. "It wasn't even on the initial (project) spreadsheet. We were very glad to see that this project is now on the list.

"What we were working on the whole time is the importance of highways ... for the (purpose of) economic development. We identified this area, a number of years ago, as 'the' hot spot in Fayette County. And really (it's) the only hot spot right now."

In his letter, Dufalla wrote that PennDOT has added the two projects to Fayette County's draft Transportation Improvement Program for fiscal years 2003-2006. He noted that four other improvement projects were previously placed on the list following county input: two segments covering Route 21 from Route 166 to Route 40, the Torchlight Restaurant intersection on Route 40, and the ramps on Route 119 at Walnut Hill.

However, Dufalla wrote that PennDOT was not able to program funding for the proposed relocation of New Salem Road from Matthew Drive to Route 40. He listed three options available to the county and the township for obtaining future funding for this proposed Matthew Drive Extension.

Shell, though, said the relocation isn't as high a priority as the other projects - and may not be necessary. "We just might do the upgrade on existing Matthew Drive instead of a relocation. We might do four lanes (following the route of the existing two-lane road)," Shell said.

Shell noted that the county gets a Transportation Improvement Program allocation through PennDOT of \$54 million over four years, but noted that every two years the priorities within that program are updated.

"The key was to get these projects on (the list) to get them started with the engineering. Because obviously once you get them started you're going to follow through," Shell said, adding that state Sen. Richard A. Kasunic (D-Dunbar) played a key role in helping bring the county and PennDOT to agreement.

One of the funding options outlined by Dufalla was adding the roadway to the federal aid highway system, which Schiffbauer said has already been done. Another was to seek funding for the road through the Appalachian Regional Commission as an important economic development project.

Shell said she had a meeting with a representative of the Southwestern Pennsylvania Commission to discuss that option. She added that the county would not have to join SPC to tap those funds, which would come from the economic development side of SPC and not its transportation wing.

Dufalla's third option was to use a combination of county, township and Fayette County Redevelopment Authority

funding, and possibly some private funding, to get the ball rolling on the Matthew Drive relocation effort.

Schiffbauer said the township supervisors, county commissioners and redevelopment authority agree that the New Salem Road-Route 40 area, where the redevelopment authority is developing a 277-acre business park, is ripe for big-time development.

"This is the spot that the businesses want to be in," said Schiffbauer. "It's a clustering effect. Whatever we and PennDOT can do to provide the infrastructure to encourage growth, we have to do it."

Cavanagh and Vicites could not be reached for comment Wednesday afternoon.

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