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South Hamilton Crossing project reaches key milestone

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HAMILTON — After more than a century of talking about the need for an overpass over South Hamilton Crossing, the long-awaited project could begin sometime next month.

The Butler County Transportation Improvement District voted Monday to award the construction contract with the John R. Jurgensen Co.

David Spinney, executive director of the Butler County Transportation Improvement District, said the bids were opened on April 28 and that the apparent low bidder was the John R. Jurgensen Co. of Sharonville. Spinney said the TID and city officials met with company officials to reviewing the bid before it goes before it went to the board for final approval.

"The low (base) bid was just under \$17 million and there are a couple of alternate bids," he said.

Spinney said he will be recommending an overall bid of more than \$17.9 million with two alternatives that include some piping made with reinforced concrete lining for drainage and the other alternative will be for fencing and lighting on the overpass.

He expects construction on the long-awaited project to begin sometime in June pending completion of final reviews and paperwork.

In addition, the BCTID also approved a \$1.7 million contract with Omnipro of Gahanna, Ohio, for construction management and inspection services.

"I never thought this would ever happen," said Jim Blount, BCTID chairman, former Journal-News editor, and local historian. "I wrote columns and stories about this for decades."

Blount said until 1960, the South Hamilton Crossing project was a top priority for the city. However, it was later decided that it made more sense to complete High Street first to the connector (eventually to Interstate 75), he said.

The nearly \$29 million railroad overpass project, which has been more than 100 years in the making, has been making progress in getting started. Since March, preparation work has been underway as the city of Hamilton closed the Central Avenue crossing just north of Grand Boulevard and Pleasant Avenue and Cincinnati Bell crews have been relocating major telecommunication lines.

Hamilton City Council recently approved an amendment to the agreement between the city and BCTID for the project, which is expected to be completed sometime in 2018.

The planned project includes various improvements on Grand Boulevard starting just west of Twelfth Street. The project includes various street and intersection improvements, an overpass over the CSX railroad tracks, a relocated intersection of Grand Boulevard and Pleasant Avenue/U.S. 127, and continuing with the extension of Grand Boulevard with other future intersection improvements before connecting with University Boulevard.

The new road extension and overpass will create a new direct east/west route from Ohio 4 to University Boulevard for residents and businesses. In addition, it will provide a direct route to Miami University Hamilton and the Vora Technology Park, where 1,500 new jobs at the new BarclayCard processing facility will be located, and also open up between 50 to 60 acres of greenfield at the city-owned University Commerce Park for future development.

Once the project is completed sometime in late 2018, it will eliminate several safety issues that has concerned city officials since 1910 that include numerous car/train accidents where two lanes of Central Avenue cross four rail tracks owned by CSX and Norfolk Southern, as well as delaying first responders in emergencies due to train traffic, according to Blount.

City officials have also said when the rail crossing is blocked due to passing trains, it could mean a detour of about three miles and adding close to 10 minutes for police, fire and emergency medical services responding to residents and businesses on a busy day. The rail tracks bisect Hamilton north and south and are mainlines for both railroads. About 60 trains a day come through Hamilton daily and traffic is blocked at that crossing and nine others some 15 percent during the day, officials said.

In addition to eliminating the current unsafe rail crossing that is used by thousands of vehicles a day, the new overpass will reduce congestion on High Street.

Rich Engle, city engineer and public works director, said the current average daily traffic is 16,700 vehicles, excluding trucks which are prohibited from using it.

"Future Average Daily Traffic is predicted to be the same," he said in an email. "However, be aware this prediction was made prior to Barclaycard moving into Vora. So there will be more traffic including trucks."

Engle said, "I expect traffic on High Street using the underpass will diminish somewhat because motorists will find the connection between South Erie Highway and Pleasant Avenue to be more convenient to use."

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