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COMPLETE COVERAGE: HAMILTON

State OKs \$10 million for fixes at 'dangerous' railroad crossing

By Vivienne Machi

Staff Writer

HAMILTON — A major Hamilton infrastructure project more than a century in the making just got a big step forward as \$10 million in state funds was approved to support its construction in 2016.

Last week, the Ohio Department of Transportation's Transportation Review Advisory Council (TRAC) approved to budget \$10 million in state funds for the South Hamilton Crossing. The project that will replace at-grade railroad crossings with a bridge overpass by extending Grand Boulevard west to Pleasant Avenue and then to University Boulevard.

TRAC recommended allocating the funds this past December, but it's a relief to know that the funding is definitely coming through, said David Spinney, director for the Butler County Transportation Improvement District.

"Without the aid of the ODOT funds, we really did not have the ability to go forward with the project," he said.

The project's current budget of \$28.8 million will be funded in part by the city of Hamilton, which is contributing approximately half of the price tag, according to Public Works Director Richard Engle. The city has also received \$2.45 million in funding from OKI Regional Council of Governments, and \$500,000 from the Transportation Improvement District to pay for property and right-of-way acquisition, which is currently underway. Spinney said that the district may provide another \$250,000 for construction costs, and Engle said that CSX, whose railroad tracks flow through the city, should contribute about 5 percent of the cost.

"This will close a very dangerous crossing for them, and they are always interested in closing crossings, (and) having more open space between crossings," Engle said.

In 2010, the Butler County Transportation Improvement District became the lead agency in restarting the project in cooperation with ODOT, at the request of the city of Hamilton.

"It's a project that obviously, the city has been interested in for a long time, and the district came online to show that we were really serious and this was an important project for the region and county," Spinney said.

Currently, there is only one grade separation along the CSX line where traffic is not routinely stopped by trains passing through: Over High Street just before Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard. Adding another connector would provide commuters into and through the city with an alternate route, thus freeing up the High Street traffic that tends to build up through Hamilton's core.

"It also connects that whole section of Hamilton to the east, which ultimately has a much better connection to Bypass 4, so it makes the network function better," Spinney continued.

Once right-of-way and property acquisitions are complete, construction advertising should begin through ODOT by the end of the year, Engle said. While construction depends upon raising the full funds needed — the project is still short about \$4 million — the tentative timeline shoots for early 2016 to begin construction, and completion by 2018.

"We hope to make up that \$4 million in a number of different ways, but \$10 million goes a long way toward making this project happen," Spinney said.

Ohio Rep. Wes Retherford, R-Hamilton, urged support of this project when a public comment period was open this past January.

"Being able to fix this dangerous, and often congested, intersection will greatly enhance the travel, safety and economic opportunities for everyone that works and lives in the area," he said.

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