

The Norwalk Hour

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TRANSPORTATION

All alternatives on the table

Residents weigh in on Route 7-Merritt Parkway overhaul

By Robert Koch

NORWALK — Residents and elected officials weighed in on the state's developing plan to overhaul the Route 7-Merritt Parkway interchange during a public meeting at Norwalk Concert Hall on Tuesday evening.

Input ranged from praise for the state Department of Transportation's inclusion of various stakeholders to why the project is being undertaken at all given the Route 7 Connector ends at Grist Mill Road.

"It's a road to nowhere. You want to put an exit ramp to no-

where," said Joe Cusack, referring to a proposed ramp from the southbound parkway to the northbound connector.

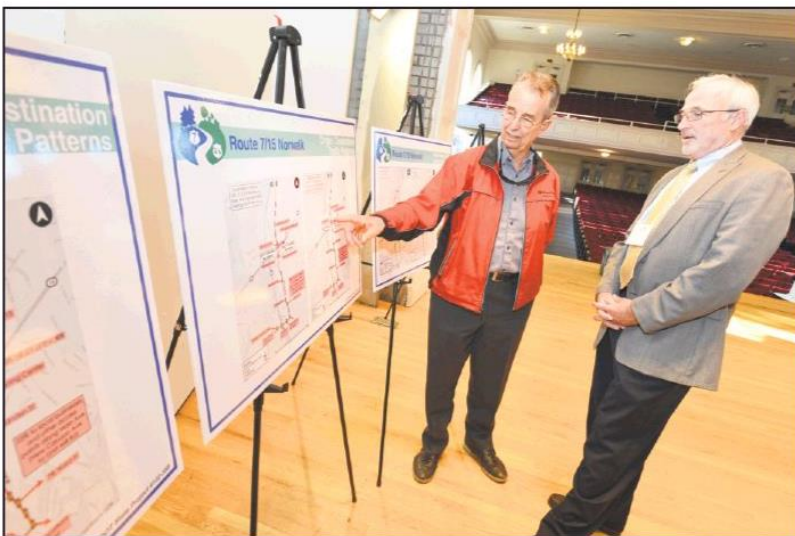
Cusack said the state first must decide whether it intends to build Super 7 — the never-realized expressway between Norwalk

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Andy Fesenmeyer, state Department of Transportation project manager, shows Joanne Ferrera a plan during a public meeting at Norwalk City Hall on Tuesday.

Alex von Kleydorff / Hearst Connecticut Media



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John Eberle, principal with consulting engineer Stantec, answers questions for Martin Weimer during the state Department of Transportation's public meeting on the overhaul of Route 7 and the Merritt Parkway at Norwalk City Hall on Tuesday.

OVERHAUL

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and Danbury.

The DOT and engineering consultant Stantec have completed a draft purpose-of-need statement. While subject to revision, the document lays out the rationale for the overhaul: to complete the missing connections between the connector and the parkway.

Motorists traveling south on the Merritt Parkway cannot exit to either the north- or southbound Route 7 Connector. Motorists driving either north or south on the connector cannot exit to the northbound parkway.

A lawsuit and later economic recessions halted the state's original plan to overhaul the interchange. On Tuesday eve-

ning, DOT Project Manager Andy Fesenmeyer told more than 60 people gathered in the City Hall auditorium that all design alternatives remain under consideration since planning halted in 2009.

"To date, we have 26 alternatives, some with variations," Fesenmeyer said. "Our most-recent alternatives are 21C and 26. It's possible we're going to have some new alternatives based on ideas tonight. It's important to note that all alternatives are on the table right now."

Alternative 21C could complete all connections between the Route 7 Connector, the Merritt Parkway and Main Avenue by the use of ramps allowing free-flow traffic. Alternative 26, while also completing the connections, would add traffic signals to the con-

connector north and south of the parkway and leave room for a boulevard.

Marcia Kibbe, who lives in the Silvermine neighborhood, urged the DOT to reject the signalized approach.

"I'm concerned about the accidents that could be happening," Kibbe said. "I'm also concerned about noise from big trucks putting on their brakes to stop at those stoplights."

A number of elected officials, including Councilman Douglas Hempstead, Mayor Harry Rilling, Sixth Taxing District Commission Chairwoman Tammy Langalis, and state Reps. Fred Wilms and Gail Lavielle attended the meeting.

Lavielle, R-Wilton, noted DOT Commissioner James Redeker's recent doubts about the department being able to

bond projects beyond 2020. Against such funding constraints, she asked the department to analyze the overhaul against other projects in Gov. Dannel P. Malloy's 30-year transportation improvement plan.

"We have a lot of state-of-good-repair work to do," Lavielle said.

Wilms said he was glad the DOT has kept Alternative 21C on the table. He described Alternative 26 as a "little out of the box" but meriting a further look. He thanked the department speaking with stakeholders.

"I encourage the DOT to keep the public outreach going," said Wilms, R-Norwalk.

Fesenmeyer asked the public to submit its comments by Nov. 16. The input will be incorporated into a scoping summary report. The DOT and its consultant hope to narrow down the design alternatives early next year and put forward a preferred design by the end of 2018.

The department will prepare a report outlining all anticipated effects of the preferred design — from environmental to noise, traffic and historic resources — as part of compliance with the federal and state National Environmental Policy acts.

Rich Armstrong, DOT principal engineer, estimated the project will cost anywhere from \$100 million to more than \$200 million, based upon the design chosen.

"We look forward to be in a position to look for that federal and state construction money," Armstrong said. "That would happen typically after we conclude this environmental document phase."

The DOT hopes to start work in 2019.

For information about the project, visit 7-15norwalk.com.