

Fort Worth Business Press

Two proposed alternatives offered for Tower 55 congestion

BY LESLIE WIMMER

August 17, 2009

Options for clearing congestion at clogged downtown rail yard Tower 55 have been narrowed, and one of two long-term proposals may have a significant impact on business and property owners parallel to Interstate 30.

The two long-term proposals, which are still in planning phases, are both trenches, constructed about 30 feet below the ground, to reroute three lines of rail traffic through the downtown area while avoiding the Tower 55 rail intersection. One trench would run north to south, parallel to and west of Interstate-35W, while another would run east to west, parallel to and south of I-30.

Should work on the trench proposals continue to move along, and funding – the trenches could cost from \$565 million to about \$700 million – come through, construction could start in about 10 years, said Tom Shelton, a senior program manager with the North Central Texas Council of Governments.

Officials from the Council of Governments, Union Pacific Railroad and Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway also are working on more immediate surface improvements to the Tower 55 intersection which, should the plans receive funding from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, could be complete within about three years.

The largest concerns on right of way acquisitions and business impacts are directed toward the east-west trench plan, Shelton said. The east-west trench plan, as it exists in planning stages now, affects 58 properties parallel to I-30, including historic buildings, businesses and other structures.

The east-west plan also would require reconstructing a number of highway exit ramps.

“The east-west running tracks are completely outside of the rail road right of way; they run between I-30 and Vickery Boulevard, and [the plan] impacts approximately 58 properties, 56 of those would have to be full acquisitions,” Shelton said. “It displaces several businesses and structures, and some are historic.”

The east-west trench has to be planned south of I-30 and outside of the current rail road right of way because a trench north of and parallel to I-30 would be

physically impossible to build, Shelton said, due to interference with the columns supporting the I-30 and I-35W interchange.

The north-south trench, as it exists in planning stages now, would affect nine properties with right of way acquisitions along the frontage road of I-35W.

“Only five would have to be acquired,” Shelton said. “The other four we just need what I would call small slivers of property toward the back of their property... a couple of feet of the back of their property, and it would allow for them to remain there.”

About 170 area residents, business owners and citizens attended a series of recent Council of Governments public meetings on Tower 55. Of those attendees, 81 filled out a questionnaire with their opinion on which trench plan would be best. The results showed 5 percent of attendees wanted no construction on either trench, 6 percent favored the east-west trench, and 89 percent favored the north-south trench plan.

From a rail business perspective, construction on the east-west trench would not affect rail traffic through Tower 55 because the construction would be south of the rail yard. Construction on the north-south trench would interrupt traffic through the yard, Shelton said.

Officials from both Burlington Northern Santa Fe and Union Pacific said they don't have a preference between the two trench options yet, but in considering both plans they want to focus on ensuring construction doesn't impede rail traffic and delivery times.

“When you look at the end result, both alternatives have great benefits,” said Clint Schelbitzki, director of public affairs for Union Pacific. “What we're most concerned about is being able to serve the businesses in the Southern half of the United States in the construction process, and that's with either alternative. The cost of getting this wrong is a cost that we will all have to bear as residents and consumers.”

In the meantime, both Union Pacific and Burlington Northern want to focus on securing funding for surface improvements under way at Tower 55, which include constructing about 9,000 feet of new rail line north and south of the rail yard, said Nate Asplund, director of public-private partnerships at Burlington Northern Santa Fe. Surface improvements also would include signal work at Tower 55, and safety improvements to some railroad crossings in Fort Worth.

The surface work also may relieve congestion enough for officials to work more on tweaking the trench plans.

“When you look at the [surface improvements], we’re projecting about a 40 percent increase in capacity, and depending on the economy, and that’s anyone’s guess on how the economy will rebound, that could buy us 10, 15, 20 years of extra capacity for us to get the [trench] alternatives correct and move forward with a plan there,” Schelbitzki said.