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by Willis Mahannah, Editor

One thing officials from communities along U.S. Highway 275 from Norfolk to Hooper learned last night (Tuesday) while discussing ways to strengthen their case for needed improvements to that route — be it either an expressway or a 4-lane highway — is that there still is a lot to learn. They hope to have answers to several questions before meeting again in January and then taking their case to the State Highway Commission.

Last night's meeting in Norfolk was attended by city officials from West Point, Beemer, Wisner, Scribner, Norfolk and a few other communities.

Norfolk City Administrator Shane Weidner said the meeting was put together to "brainstorm" in hopes the communities can "build a coalition of stakeholders to strongly encourage the state to enhance Highway 275 to four lanes during the second phase, from 2023 to 2033, of the Build Nebraska Act."

That would mean it wouldn't be funded for at least another 10 years, because the Highway 275 expressway wasn't included in the Act's first phase, which lists several projects to be completed through fiscal year 2023.

To get an idea of the frustration that has been building in the communities along Highway 275, consider that the 4-lane expressway was first proposed in the late 1980s and early 1990s. There is a 47-mile gap between Hooper and the turnoff to Stanton, east of Norfolk, left undone. All of the community officials who spoke last night agreed that something needs to be done to improve the highway.

They heard from Kevin Domogalla, NDOR District 3 Highway Engineer, who said that stretch of highway is also important to him because the current road surface "won't last for another 10 years."

Asked about the chances of the NDOR switching gears and approving a 4-lane highway that passes through the communities rather than planning the expressway that would bypass them, Domogalla said he's not sure Highway 275 fits the DOR's requirements for a 4-lane designation because it doesn't carry 10,000 vehicles a day.

He also said the "footprint" needed for a 4-lane system to remain in the communities is quite a bit larger than the space any of those communities have available. That's because current 4-lane standards require a turning lane.

Surprising to some, including West Point Mayor Marlene Johnson, was that, according to Domogalla, the expressway system has no daily traffic criteria.

Johnson, and some others at the meeting, said they had always been told that, initially, 6,500 vehicles a day was the minimum needed before an expressway could be built, and then the number was raised to 10,000 vehicles a day.

Mayor Johnson said the higher vehicle count was thought to put the expressway project in jeopardy since the 20-year projection for Highway 275 is an average of 8,000 vehicles per day. Domogalla noted the opposite is true – that there is no vehicle per day criteria for an expressway, and that Highway 275's traffic count would probably rule it out of just making it a 4-lane highway.

He did say it might be possible to make the highway a "super two." That would leave it as a

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2-lane road, but with the addition of a few passing lanes at certain spots.

West Point City Administrator Tom Goulette and Scribner City Administrator Al Vacanti both wondered if the DOR's thought process since 1980 might be changing in light of the push for more rural economic development.

Domogalla said rural communities have raised that issue, but that he hasn't sensed a change in thinking on the DOR's part.

Goulette also said it would be helpful if the DOR's requirements for a 4-lane highway through a community could be shared with the cities so they could determine if they thought it would be feasible for them.

Mayor Johnson said the problem with bypassing the communities comes from the fact that it's been more than 20 years since the expressway was first proposed and West Point has seen development along the current highway. She said the feedback she gets from West Point residents is that they don't want the bypass.

Also present last night was Dave Copple, State Highway Commissioner for this area, who said it was important for the group to have a single message and to attend commission meetings to state their case.

The group came up with several questions that Domogalla said he would help provide answers for before the group meets again in January.

Weidner echoed Copple's comments on having a unified voice. He said it's important that the stakeholders share the same goal.

"Each of us may want something a bit different," he said. "But at the end of the day we want improvements to 275, whether that ends up being a 4-lane, an expressway or a highway with lanes for passing."