

Powers-as-freeway idea losing steam

Aug 23, 2005

Development, lack of money could douse plans

By ED SEALOVER THE GAZETTE

Colorado Springs City Council members appear ready to scrap the idea of turning Powers Boulevard into a freeway, saying a sparsity of money and density of development has rendered the plan nearly impossible.

For the past decade, officials envisioned Powers as a interstate-style road with onramps and offramps replacing the stoplights that pockmark the city's eastern business corridor.

Over that same period, though, city leaders also assumed the state would put aside hundreds of millions of dollars to pay for the highway's extension to Interstate 25 on its north and south ends.

Both of those ideas could be revised soon. Council members, increasingly frustrated with the sluggish speed of improvements to Powers, said Monday that it may be time to rethink the \$900 million freeway plans.

Developments are being put on hold while waiting to see if the city gets enough money to buy rights-of-way, Vice Mayor Larry Small said.

Council members don't believe they'll see the full amount from the state. So the money they get could better be used to build some overpasses and improve other stretches without taking as much land as construction of exit ramps would require, they said.

"Do we really need a freeway? Could we do a modified expressway and serve it at a lower cost?" Small said. "I just think we need to revisit the whole thing and see if it's what we want in the future."

The idea of making Powers a freeway has had detractors. Roadside merchants complain that limiting highway access will hurt business, while residents suggest any freeway be built further east, where land hasn't been developed.

It wasn't until Monday, though, that council members began to question the logic of creating a four- and sixlane freeway there.

Under a 1999 agreement, the city turned Powers over to the Colorado Department of Transportation in exchange for its taking on maintenance of Academy Boulevard, also known as Colorado Highway 83. Officials saw it as a way to get the state to pay for expensive build-out costs.

The agreement specified that the Powers extension from Briargate Parkway to Highway 83 be done by 2002 and three overpasses built by 2006, Small said. The extension is due to be completed in September, and just one overpass is in place.

City engineer Cam McNair noted the agreement allowed for a slower schedule if state money was not available. He said he thinks the terms of the agreement have been met.

Small lamented the fact that improvements originally scheduled to be completed by 2012 are not slated to be done now until 2020.

Money is trickling in. The city will have access to just \$7 million out of \$70 million needed to buy rights-of-way by 2007, and CDOT has committed just \$73 million to the road, staffers confirmed.

So the vice mayor and other council members suggested the city request changes to the agreement. That could mean amending the vision to one of an expressway

with some offramps and some lights rather than a full freeway.

"Can we inject some reality into this?" Councilman Tom Gallagher said. "Unless somebody in the state of Colorado gets a printing press and authority from Congress to print their own money, (the freeway) is never going to happen."

Terry Schooler, the area representative to the Colorado Transportation Commission, said the council is doing well to start planning for alternatives. Just because the Powers extension is on the state's long-range plan "doesn't mean it's going to happen," he said.

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