
UMore, Vermillion Highland road planning narrows focus

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The road may not be built for two or three decades in Rosemount, but an argument about its route through either private or public land is on the fast track.

"Public land shouldn't be viewed as an easy option for right of way," said outdoorsman Mark Henry, who attended a June 29 open house on future transportation needs in the UMore Park and Vermillion Highlands area.

Dakota County officials hope to approve a roadway plan by the end of the year that would eventually serve the University of Minnesota's 5,000-acre UMore Park where 12,000 homes and commercial, recreational and eco-industrial development are proposed over the next 30 years, as well as the 2,800-acre Vermillion Highland park set aside for research, recreation and wildlife.

Henry, a Castle Rock Township resident and habitat chair for the Dakota Ringnecks chapter of Pheasants Forever, said Vermillion Highland should remain untouched. One possible north-south corridor would cut through a wetland on the east side of the park.

Two other alternate roads, however, would bisect Rosemount resident Mark Beltz' 18-acre property that he rents to Hmong farmers.

"If the university is creating the problem they should be part of the solution," said Beltz, who also gave input at the meeting Monday at the Rosemount Community Center.

The property south of UMore Park will be deeded to the state by the university as part of the agreement for the state's support of the new Gopher football stadium.

Larry Luakka, a senior adviser to UMore Park, said whatever happened in UMore could be independent from the roads in Vermillion Highland.

"We're not at loggerheads," he said.

Seven possibilities each for east-west and north-south arterials within the study area - portions of Rosemount and Empire Township bound by County Road 42 to the north, County Road 81 to the east, Highway 50 to the south and Highway 3 to the west - were presented for public input.

After the first open house in April, county planners eliminated other possibilities that weren't consistent with current community and transportation planning or natural resources.

"We looked generally at corridors along with a real high-level assessment on 'fatal flaws' - which options don't meet our core objectives," said Brian Sorenson, Dakota County transportation program engineer.

From the remaining options will likely come one new north-south road each on the west and east sides of the study area, one new east-west road and expansion of existing east-west roads. Based on the county's 2030 Comprehensive Plan plus the UMore proposal, an estimated four to six more lanes are needed on north-south roads to handle a traffic volume of 50,500 vehicles a day. Four to six more lanes would also be needed for the 103,300 vehicles expected to travel east-west each day.

Sorenson said it's the north-south road on the east side of the study area that is drawing most discussion. One option, which Henry opposes, would connect County Road 79 to County State Aid Highway 71 via a new road through the park. It would require 111 acres of right of way. The other two options connect 79 and 71 by heading east around the park via Country Road 81 with some

variation. Those options affect 37 and 27 parcels respectively, including Beltz's land, and would require between 119 and 124 acres of right of way.

Sorenson said while road construction would occur only as development in UMore progressed, it's important to plan the system now.

"It would be helpful for [stakeholders] in the long-term to know if there are going to be any changes," said Sorenson. "We need to have a planned roadway system and it's not just about one roadway corridor."

Over the next few months, the county, city of Rosemount, Empire Township, University of Minnesota and Minnesota Department of Natural Resources will continue to analyze the system. Draft recommendations are expected in November. Sorenson said the county would then ask the Rosemount City Council and other partners to ratify a final transportation plan.

Information on the study, including maps displaying the road options, is available online at www.dakotacounty.us by searching "UMore transportation study." Input can still be provided to Sorenson at 952-891-7122 or brian.sorenson@dakotacounty.us.

UMore gravel update

The University of Minnesota Board of Regents last month approved a document outlining the scope of its proposed sand and gravel mining project on the 5,000-acre UMore property in Rosemount and Empire Township.

Approval of the scoping decision document, which calls for extraction on the western third of the site or roughly 1,600 acres, is a key step in the sand and gravel environmental impact statement that must be completed before mining begins.

The scoping document also identifies possible environmental impacts and project alternatives for in-depth study in the environmental impact statement. The impact statement will be finalized over the next year.

A draft version is expected in December 2009 with a public comment period beginning January 2010. The environmental impact statement will then be revised with the comments in mind before a final version is submitted for state Environmental Quality Board review next summer. The university's goal is to have the site ready for mining operations to commence in 2010.

The scoping decision document can be viewed online at www.umorepark.umn.edu.