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Proposals for street grant picked apart

Projects proposed by city, Bethlehem Twp. get negative PennDOT response.

Tuesday, September 28, 2004

By **NICK FALSONE**
 The Express-Times

HANOVER TWP. -- Grant money the city of Bethlehem and Bethlehem Township seek for major street enhancement projects is facing stiff opposition from the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation.

PennDOT officials on Monday said the two projects probably won't qualify for funding under the new Hometown Streets/Safe Routes to School Program.

The projects proposed by the city and township were among 14 in the region presented to the Lehigh Valley Transportation Study's technical committee during the committee's monthly meeting. No action was taken on any of the proposals, but PennDOT officials made several recommendations.

The committee will vote on which municipalities to award grant money to on Oct. 25. Before anything is allocated, the LVTS coordinating committee must also give approval. That will happen in November.

The Hometown Streets/Safe Routes to School Program provides \$128 million for projects to improve street landscapes and projects that allow children a safe route for walking to school.

Half of the \$128 million will go into a special account that can be used for the projects at the secretary of transportation's discretion and the rest will be divvied up among regions statewide, said Jay McGee, PennDOT's regional grant manager.

Lehigh and Northampton counties stand to receive about \$2.5 million, but the 14 projects proposed Monday would require a total of about \$5.1 million in funding if they were all to be completed.

The sponsors of the projects, mostly municipalities, pleaded their cases Monday for a chunk of the \$2.5 million. PennDOT officials dismissed some of the projects after hearing the pleas.

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The city of Bethlehem, which requested nearly \$1 million for a Five Points area enhancement project in the south side, was among those shot down by PennDOT.

Darlene Heller, the city's planning director, said the project includes turning portions of Wyandotte and Broadway into one-way roads to create space for street side enhancements such as wider sidewalks. The project would improve traffic in the busy area, she said.

McGee said he has a hard time seeing the project as eligible for the grant money, citing the conversion to the one-way roads is a traffic enhancement that is not meant to be covered by this type of grant.

McGee also gave a similar response to Bethlehem Township's proposal to revamp Santee Road, which runs between Chester Road and Easton Avenue and is a major throughway to Freedom High School.

"This is a whole street project with sidewalks thrown in," he said.

Howard Kutzler, the township's planning director, said the township is seeking about \$800,000 to resurface the road, improve drainage and create sidewalks for students walking to the school. He said the road is in such poor condition that just adding sidewalks would be unfeasible.

Other projects being considered for the grant money include: streetscape enhancements to downtown Bangor and Easton, the creation of new crosswalks in Wilson Borough and a walking trail near Saucon Valley School District's complex in Lower Saucon Township.

In other business, the committee voted to set aside money in the event PennDOT decides that lining a portion of Bushkill Creek as a sinkhole-prevention measure would be feasible.

On Friday, a task force that formed in February after a sinkhole damaged a northbound Route 33 bridge over the creek reported that quarry pumping contributes to incessant sinkhole activity in and along the creek.

Slowing down pumping by lining the creek could reduce the number of new sinkholes that surface, PennDOT officials said. The idea will continue to be studied, but officials wanted about \$1 million in local funds earmarked for any future work that might be done.

Don Lerch, the assistant executive for design with PennDOT District 5, said the money is coming from local bridge projects scheduled for this year that never materialized.

Also, Lerch gave the committee an update on the status of bridges damaged by heavy flooding from Tropical Depression Ivan. He said several bridges including the Lower Saucon Road Bridge in Lower Saucon Township and a bridge in Jacobsburg State Park will have to be repaired or replaced.

The cost of the work has yet to be determined, but Lerch said there will likely be a need for federal emergency relief funding.

Reporter Nick Falsone can be reached at 610-867-5000 or by e-mail at nfalsone@express-times.com.

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