Independence Gives Go-Ahead to State For M-291 Planning

By Steve Fehr
A Member of the Staff

The Independence City Council informally approved in concept yesterday a series of projects to improve traffic conditions and safety along a stretch of M-291.

Council approval is necessary to allow the Missouri Highway Department to proceed with its plan to widen M-291 from two to four lanes.

Specific improvements were not approved by the council at a study session yesterday because city officials want to wait until the state presents its final plans for the highway in about three months. The improvements would be constructed along M-291 from 23rd south to Hidden Valley Road, William C. Bullard, city planning director, said.

At issue in a broader sense, city officials said, is the commercial development along the highway which has been considered dangerous because of its narrowness.

Among the suggested improvements are the addition of lighted intersections at M-291 and Gudgell, M-291 north of Shrank, and M-291 and 23rd north of the Farm Bureau Mutual Insurance Company of Missouri, 2528 South M-291.

A frontage road would be built on the west side of M-291 extending from the north property line of the Farm Bureau firm south to Hidden Valley Road. Such a road would eliminate a lot of residential traffic along M-291, Bullard said.

Other proposed projects would extend Gudgell east beyond M-291 and along R.D. Mize Road to a proposed north-south trafficway and would extend 35th east to link with R.D. Mize, he said.

These improvements are subject to further refinement or even elimination, Bullard stressed. "We've not meant this plan to be a final decision at all," he said.

Support for the concept of making improvements along M-291 was expressed by George L. Satterlee, Jr., state highway district engineer who attended the meeting yesterday.

The state is to pay for the M-291 widening and the city is to pay for the access roads, although Lyle W. Alberg, city manager, said he is not sure where the money for the project would come from.

Satterlee outlined the state plan to widen M-291 and said he would return in three months with final plans. He said the state could not proceed with its plans until the council expressed support for the concept of making improvements.

"We want to proceed on the plan but we don't want to do it all by our lonesome," Satterlee told council members. "We're ready and willing to go but we need your support."

Traffic along M-291 was projected by Satterlee to be 23,000 cars a day by 1981, a figure that Bullard later said was conservative. The state has projected that between 31,000 and 51,000 cars a day will use various parts of the highway by 1997.

Twenty per cent of the traffic along the highway is made up of persons traveling from other areas of the state, Satterlee said. The rest of the traffic is local, he said.

Council members had a heated discussion of a proposal by Paul L. Roberts, Sr., a former council member and a developer, who sought council approval of tentative plans for commercial development west along the highway about half way between 23rd and Shrank. The proposed development would consist of 19 commercial lots with one main entrance, Roberts said.

Action on the proposal was deferred until March 17 after the council decided to wait for plans from another property owner affected by Roberts's project and the M-291 project.

Ray A. Heady, council member, said he does not want to decide on Roberts's plan until the state submits its final plans in three months.

"This (M-291) is a through road. This is not another Noland Road. I would like to see this whole thing laid out in front of me. I don't want to approve a piecemeal thing," Heady said. "To me, this is one of the major decisions this council will make this year."

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Funding Problems Cause Setback in Marina Plans

By Christina Floan
A Member of the Staff

A disagreement between Parkville and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers over financing construction of a marina on the Missouri River has put a snag in plans for the facility.

Mayor William Latta of Parkville told the board of aldermen Tuesday that the corps would not accept the city's cost-sharing plan that included the marina and that the city does not have

Representatives of the corps and city will meet again to discuss ways of working around the problem, Latta said. One way might include other federal or state funding, he said. No date has been set for the meeting.

Latta said the marina the city has struggled to build for more than five years will not be abandoned, although the corps may be less involved than originally planned.



Reminder

Robert B. Jones, Weston, examines an old cellar on his property where slaves are believed to have been confined more than a century ago. The cellar, located about midway between Weston and Platte City on Route J, at one time was beneath an inn. It is believed the inn was torn down during the early part of this century.
(Staff photo by John W. Switzer)

Old Cellar a Vestige of Days of Slavery

By Bert T. Rude III
A Member of the Staff

NORTHLAND HISTORY

An abandoned cellar east of Weston stands today as a reminder of a style of life more than a century ago when slavery was a part of the Platte County economy.

"In this dungeon, lighted and ventilated by three small slits 24 by 9 inches, slaves were kept chained to heavy iron rings in the ceiling while the traders regaled themselves elsewhere," wrote a journalist about 50 years ago.

The semicircular cellar, constructed of native limestone, is about three miles west of Platte City next to Route J. Now it appears to be a good-sized but long-abandoned culvert, open at both ends and covered on top by earth.

But at one time the cellar was covered on both sides and was beneath a tavern called the Half Way House, frequented in the mid-1800s by slave traders, settlers and merchants on their way from Liberty and other eastern points to St. Joseph, Ft. Leavenworth and other points west and northwest. Accounts vary, but the slaves apparently were domestic servants of travelers or were field hands who either had just been purchased or who were on their way to being sold. The slaves reportedly were chained in the cellar "to detain them from wandering" to freedom in nearby Kansas, Dr. Raymond J. Felling, a Weston historian, said. "In one night's travel they could get their freedom. If they could get across the (Missouri) river they were free."

The cellar, which has a dirt floor, is about 25 feet long, 17 feet wide and 10 feet deep.

Area residents said about nine iron rings at one time were anchored between the smooth stones of the cellar. All since have been removed by souvenir hunters or scavengers.

It is unknown when the inn and cellar were constructed but construction probably occurred in the 1830s or 1840s.

The 1½-story inn and tavern was constructed of wood and the basement walls were made of limestone. The kitchen and dining room were in the basement, apparently not far from the cellar where the slaves were chained, probably in semidarkness and without heat. "It is European and feudalistic in spirit," wrote the early journalist, who is anonymous. "Even now one can visualize the rough gaiety that prevailed at the long sturdy tables lighted by dim candles and the glow from the cavernous stone fireplace where the cooking was done. One can imagine the motley crew of hunters, traders and voyagers that sat at the tavern board and enjoyed the feasts of venison, wild turkey and other pioneer foods."

Slavery was important to the early county economy because cheap labor was needed to harvest hemp which for decades was the principal county crop.

"From the first settlement of the county, hemp was the staple product . . ." wrote W.M. Paxton in his Annals of Platte County, Missouri, published in 1897. "No soil on earth, whether timber or prairie, is better adapted to hemp than Platte County. After a few years, the South looked more to Missouri than to Kentucky for a supply of hemp for bagging and rope." The county, Dr. Felling said, was officially opened for settlement Jan. 1, 1837. History books speak of isolated settlements as early as 1820.

The inn probably was named because of its location. The site is midway between Platte City and Weston, but Dr. Felling contends the inn was located midway on the Liberty to St. Joseph road which passed through Weston.

"A halfway house had a different connotation (from what it does today)," Dr. Felling noted. "An inn was about halfway where you were going."

The road that went past the inn was a turnpike which tolls were charged, Dr. Felling said. The road apparently was well traveled beginning in the 1830s and 1840s as persons headed west to Oregon or into northwest Missouri to settle.

"A lot of people got off the boat at Liberty," he said. Travelers felt they could gain a little time by going overland to St. Joseph rather than taking a steamboat," he said.

The fortunes of the inn apparently were tied at least in part to the popularity of the trail. Civilian traffic apparently fell off during the Civil War.

The chaining of slaves in the cellar probably ended during the Civil War as slaves were freed.

Today only the cellar remains. Dr. Felling said the inn in its later years probably served as a farmhouse. Exactly when the inn disappeared is uncertain. Mrs. B.J. Bless, Jr., veteran Weston newspaperwoman, said remnants were visible when she began her career in 1912. But Robert Jones, Weston, owner of the property, said the structure had been torn down before he and his wife, Mrs. Annabell Jones, purchased the property in the 1930s.

Today no marker commemorates the spot where humans were held in bondage. But Jones said he plans eventually to enclose the cellar to prevent vandalism and pilferage and erect a marker telling what used to be there.

The freeing of the slaves, sources said, caused a decline in the production of hemp in the county. Freed slaves reportedly refused to perform the back-breaking work necessary to clean hemp. Production continued but declined rapidly after 1870, one source said.