

Special meeting focuses on \$11 million bypass project

BY DON SIMMONS
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The Jackson County Board of Commissioners held a special meeting Thursday, July 25, to discuss the transportation problems in Altus along highway U.S. 283, that includes improving the roads of Tamarack, Market, Carver and Ridgecrest.

The Altus Transportation Task Force was a group comprised of the Jackson County Commissioners, members of the City of Altus, the Altus Chamber of Commerce, the Circuit Engineering District #7 and others.

The group's plan for

highway U.S. 283 has been in works since June 30, 2016, that features local government officials of Altus and the state of Oklahoma. The plan addresses the heavy traffic passing through Altus that has become a continuous problem, causing numerous accidents. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration found that an estimated 342,000 trucks nationwide were involved in accidents 2013.

In 2013 and 2014, the city of Altus reported having high traffic fatalities on highway U.S. 62, the main east-west artery through the town and part of highway U.S. 283.

In both years, Altus had a higher rate of vehicles involved in fatal accidents per 100,000 population than the state average for Oklahoma.

Members of the task force filed for a grant in 2018 but it was eventually turned down stating its disapproval was partly due to it being rushed and a lack of communication. Last week's meeting was an effort to resubmit the grant request and to make it more appealing.

Glen Winters, one of the original members of the task force and an agent for the Oklahoma Farm Bureau Insurance, said it must be a joint project to be completed.

"Everybody has to buy in," Winters said. "we have to work together, and I think things go forward quicker if we are all in unity."

The group discussed the goal of the initiative is to help create a truck loop in Altus on the west side of town. The meeting's purpose was to begin a discussion with those in attendance on finding funding sources that can help with those potential road improvements.

The board handed out a book titled "Altus Economic Loop" during the meeting that provided a background of the project, that includes funding, its economic impor-

tance and guidelines.

The statement reported the mix of tractor-trailers, motorist pedestrians and bicyclists has not been safe. The report found that more than 16,000 trucks and cars go through the center of town daily. According to the group, separating truck traffic from this route is an economic benefit, allowing citizens of Altus to travel easier.

Installing a truck bypass for highway U.S. 2 and ensuring the safety of the southwestern community has been top priority for the board. The City of Altus hopes

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to help lessen the truck traffic by re-routing heavy trucks traveling north and south on highway U.S. 283 to the west of Altus.

The City of Altus' U.S. Highway 283 Bypass project is proposed to be a five-mile, two-phase project costing more than \$11 million.

The commissioners hope to receive help from a grant and use their funds available from the Jackson County account at the Oklahoma Department of Transportation (ODOT) under the County Improvement for Roads and Bridges (CIRB) fund created by Oklahoma Legislature in 2006.

In a letter of support from the ODOT Executive Director Michael Patterson, he stated \$5.5 million in CIRB funds are available for the project - taking up more than half the total cost of both Phase 1 and Phase 2 of the project.

Phase 1 of the project consists of drain and surface construction for

roughly three miles of roadway, estimating to be about \$7 million. Phase 2 will be solely completed with local funds with no federal assistance needed and will consist of drain and surface construction for approximately two miles of roadway.

Members of the task force group and other supporters of the project are asking for federal assistance of \$5 million to cover Phase 1. Any cost exceeding the stated amount will be reserved by the local and state funds to match the federal contribution.

Altus is required to match federal contributions by 20 percent. Members of the board are committed to spending \$2 million of the \$7 million a match of 28.5 percent.

Oklahoma Department of Transportation representative Tim Gates liked the board's initiative of going after a grant last year and that even though it was not successful, they need to go back after it. Gates added that ODOT wants to collaborate with

back to their community.

After much discussion the board decided to take the same route they previously did in 2016 and create another task force to help move the project along quicker. This time around members planned to learn from last year's mistakes to help assure the project gets the funds and resources needed to get done.

The meeting featured guests including Sen. Brent Howard, members from Circuit Engineering District 7, Altus Chamber of Commerce President Rodger Kerr, Altus City Manager Janice Cain and many more.

The Jackson County Board of Commissioners hope to see the project begin production next summer. It is projected that Phase 1 of the project will take two years to be completed. Phase 2 is anticipated to commence immediately afterwards.

The commissioners meet weekly at the Jackson County Courthouse, 101 N. Main St. For more information call (580) 482-

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