

YOUR SAY

# Planning problems relevant in Forest Hill lawsuit

By LEE BALLARD

Special to The Telegraph

Lindsay (Doc) Holliday is in a pitched battle with Georgia Department of Transportation well-paid lawyers having a goal to create an example of what happens to someone who has the unmitigated gall to question the actions of the department.

Holliday's well-intentioned quest for fairness for all who reside along Forest Hill Road is likely to lead to personal financial hardship.

Holliday's next court date is later this month. However, the local transportation planning process that drives citizens like Holliday to take drastic action shares a great deal of responsibility for producing the conditions wherein projects such as Forest Hill Road find their way into the Transportation Improvement Program.

The Forest Hill Road project made its appearance during the 1994 Bibb County Road Improvement Program as part of the now defunct Northwest Corridor project.

The FHR portion was divided into two segments: Segment 1, Wimbish Avenue to Northside Drive and Segment 2, Wimbish Avenue to Vineville Avenue.

Through official foot-dragging, by 2012 the estimated cost for Segment 1 had

risen from \$3.9 million to over \$8 million; Segment 2, from \$2.4 million to \$7.5 million.

To the consternation of its chairperson and the GDOT representative, the Policy Committee recently voted to remove Segment 2 from the Transportation Improvement Program. Why the committee earlier did not do likewise with Segment 1 is puzzling, to say the very least.

The Northwest Corridor, an upgraded route from north Macon to Macon Mall, rationale disappeared along with the elimination of its constituent parts, Park Street and Hollingsworth Drive.

Then there's the project study issue. The Federal Highway Administration's planning guidance states, "Transportation planning includes identifying current and projected future transportation problems and needs and analyzing through detailed planning studies, various transportation improvement strategies to address those needs."

The guidance in the Long Range Transportation Plan is similar emphasizing getting the most "benefit possible from our transportation dollars" by evaluating "a potential project to determine the viability and the desirability ... Many issues cannot be clearly or definitely answered without a very thorough study." Nevertheless, despite its moniker, the

Macon Area Transportation Study does not do studies nor does it contract for studies. The MATS recently discontinued the perennial listing of requisite studies in its Long Range Transportation Plan.

The plan simply is an unstudied, financially constrained project dream list. Project selection is based primarily on decisions issued by the MATS Policy Committee, a body presently composed of both elected and unelected voting members. The dream list often turns into a nightmare.

An MPO spokesman told me via email that, "It is important to remember that the project list adopted in the LRTP is a list of concepts that have been identified by the Policy Committee as worthy of pursuing. Virtually all projects on the list will require further study before they reach project stage."

Nevertheless, the record shows that when projects transfer from the long to the short-range Transportation Improvement Program for funding they still lack a "detailed planning study" and a benefit versus cost analysis. Forest Hill Road is a relevant example, so is Jeffersonville Road.

Furthermore, a GDOT voting member is assigned to the Policy Committee contrary to FHWA guidance: "In met-

ropolitan areas, the MPO is responsible for actively seeking the participation of all relevant agencies and stakeholders in the planning process; similarly, the state DOT is responsible for activities outside metropolitan areas."

A GDOT Policy Committee member is not mandatory. The GDOT representative voted against removing the FHR Segment 2 project from the Transportation Improvement Program. The GDOT role should be confined to an advisory capacity. There's ample opportunity for GDOT interference following LRTP and TIP updates.

Taxpayers and the voting public are partially responsible for allowing such political and bureaucratic shenanigans to exist. However, officialdom could be better transportation revenue stewards.

The 2014 change in government presents an excellent opportunity — perhaps too late to help Holliday — to evaluate the planning process and to make changes that force the Policy Committee to be more responsive to the voters who elected them — ending the bureaucratic and GDOT vote is top priority.

The judge presiding over the FHR lawsuit ought to take the planning faux pas factors into consideration.

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