

BELTON NINTH AVENUE BRIDGE

# Grant officials request more info

City continues to push project despite at least two letter-writing critics

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**BELTON** — Belton City Manager Sam Listi said Friday that U.S. Department of Transportation officials in Austin requested more information about the city's planned West Ninth Avenue bridge project, which is under consideration for a federal transportation grant.

The request comes one week after Belton activist Joe Trevino — an outspoken critic of what he views as an unethical

relationship between the city and the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor — asked grant administrators to deny the request on the grounds the bridge would only serve the university.

"As a taxpayer, I can't stress enough that I feel grant dollars should be used for projects that benefit cities as a whole and not a specific group or organization," Trevino wrote.

Listi said he was not told why the department wanted more information, which he said he emailed Friday, but he suspected it had something to do with local opposition to the project.

Those who oppose the bridge, which would connect West Ninth Avenue to Loop 121 by way of a bridge over Nolan Creek, think the city is pursuing the

bridge, in part, to relieve future traffic caused by the university's new 8,000-plus-seat football stadium, under construction at the corner of Ninth and University avenues.

Listi said he was puzzled at how a project so vital to relieve downtown congestion has become some bias earmark to the university's football stadium.

The project has been discussed as far back as the 1980s because of the city's limited ability to widen Main Street. It was even recommended by the Texas Department of Transportation following a feasibility study, he said.

"We're trying to plan for the transportation of the community. ... The inference that this is somehow associated with the UMHB expansion is simply not

true," Listi said.

According to a 2011 traffic study by Lee Engineering LLC of Dallas, the bridge would "primarily serve university traffic" and not attract "significant diversion" from traffic along FM 93 to the south or Sparta Road to the north. However, university commuters would have an alternative to driving Main Street.

So far, the city has earmarked \$800,000 from local coffers toward the project, which is money misspent, Trevino wrote in his letter.

"I am opposed to federal dollars being wasted on this bridge when its sole use will not benefit Belton citizens as a whole," he said. "There are multiple

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## Bridge project

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areas in Belton where tax-dollars can be used in drainage, sidewalks, street improvements and infrastructure."

Federal transportation spokesperson Kelly Dollinger said Friday that the department had received the letter and is "working with state and city staff to address Mr. Trevino's concerns. He should expect a response early next week."

Trevino's email is not the first time a jaded taxpayer has contacted the U.S. Department of Transportation asking officials to deny a federal grant for the bridge project.

In May, Belton resident Nancy Kelsey wrote her own email to federal transportation officials, requesting officials deny a different grant the city was seeking to fund the \$3.2 million remaining to complete the bridge project.

"I am writing to ask you to please not give a grant for this bridge," Kelsey wrote in her email.

Kelsey said she decided to contact transportation officials directly after years of her con-



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cerns falling on "deaf ears at several City Council meetings."

Despite some opposition to the bridge, the city's grant applications have included a bevy of letters from local and state politicians in support. State Sen. Troy Fraser, Rep. Ralph Sheffield and Bell County Judge Jon Burrows are among those who have previously endorsed federal funding for the project.

"We've had very, very strong support, all the way up the chain, because it's so important to traffic circulation in Belton," Listi said.

Listi said he challenged those who oppose the bridge to offer an alternative that would help solve local congestion problems.

"We've gone through the alternatives," he said, "and there just aren't any."

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