



I--35 corridor to tell Norman's story

By Andrew Knittle

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— Once they're complete, the eight bridges spanning I-35 through the heart of Norman will do more than just allow cars, trucks and motorcycles to pass safely over one of the nation's busiest highways.

They'll also tell the city's story. At least that's the intention.

Steven Weitzman, an artist who specializes in public art, addressed about 25 Norman residents Thursday evening in city council chambers during a public meeting held to discuss the aesthetics of the massive, \$150-million six-laning of I-35 in Norman, from U.S. 77 to SH 9 West.

Weitzman, whose firm Creative Design Resolutions -- along with a city aesthetics committee -- conceived the themes for the eight bridges in the Norman area over the past year, said the city has a chance to do something special with the massive project.

"It's very rare that you're going to get eight consecutive bridges that need to be replaced at basically the same time," Weitzman said. "You have a unique opportunity to develop a portal leading into and out of Norman."

The eight bridges will each have different themes as they cross I-35, including a railroad-themed Robinson Street, a Land Run-themed Main Street and a crossing at Lindsey Street drawing heavy influence from the University of Oklahoma. Those in attendance got to see detailed renderings of the eight bridges, one of which is already complete.

And Weitzman said that with his concepts, what you see is what you get.

"Anything that is finalized conceptually, we can get pretty close to that when the work is done," he said. "I think it's very important that there aren't any surprises."

The work is made possible by legislation recently passed in the state that allows a small percentage of a project's budget to be used for aesthetics. City of Norman Public Works Director Shawn O'Leary said 1.5 percent of the six-laning project's \$150 million budget will go toward aesthetics-related expenses.

Some of the most-discussed concepts included the bridge replacements at Lindsey and Main. The Lindsey Street bridge, which draws inspiration from OU, drew praise from audience members and City Manager Steve Lewis because of its incorporation of familiar Sooner colors and brick work.

The Main Street bridge, with a Land Run theme, was discussed because of its size and unusual design that resembles a Texas Turnaround. The Main Street bridge also will feature a concrete Land Run mural adorning a massive relief on the east side of I-35.

During a study session held just before the public meeting and again at the meeting itself, a noise wall on the east side of I-35 -- somewhere between Main and Lindsey -- was discussed at length.

At both meetings, Oklahoma Department of Transportation engineer Paul Rachel said the same thing about the sound barrier.

"I can't define for you where exactly it will be," Rachel said.

"But I'm almost 100-percent certain it'll be built before the bridges are started in the area."

Mayor Cindy Rosenthal said the city's aesthetics committee hasn't discussed what the noise wall will look like at this point.

Lewis said the city will continue to ask for public input regarding the aesthetics, like they did Thursday, and that the project is considered ongoing.

The I-35 widening work is already well under way, as are the aesthetics projects. The bridge at U.S. 77 is finished and the Rock Creek bridge is taking shape and should be completely done and usable by December

2010, O'Leary said.

O'Leary also said the plan is for ODOT to pay for six of the bridges, with the City of Norman eventually paying to retrofit the crossings at Tecumseh Road and Robinson Street.

Officials said the next project to get under way will be the bridge and interchange at I-35 and SH West, which will have an "agriculture and Chickasaw culture" theme. The project is expected to begin within six months.

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