

Roundabout considered downtown Fairbanks' 'best' option

FAIRBANKS — An engineering consultant said on Tuesday that a roundabout, not a traffic light, would best accommodate major traffic changes slated for downtown streets.

The option of a double-lane roundabout, which would replace the state's long-running plan, a traditional, overhead signal, has crept to the forefront of preparation for what will be the most visible downtown roadwork in years — a rebuild of Illinois and North Cushman streets. The project has been caught in a perpetual stop-and-go pattern since the late 1970s.

After hearing the recommendation, Fairbanks' transportation policymakers indicated a decision could come next month. The group asked for more time and information on how a roundabout would impact surrounding businesses including the Big I bar.

Talk of building a roundabout, which would link Illinois Street with a pair of bridges crossing the Chena River, surfaced two years ago.

It accompanied calls for adding more two-way traffic on major streets south of the river. Tuesday's analysis, from Anchorage-based Kinney Engineering, concluded a roundabout is the best way to accommodate that two-way traffic.

The recommendation places a spotlight on the Fairbanks Metropolitan Area Transportation System committee, which meets next in mid-August, and on what would be the last major change to a project the state said is ready to go — with or without a roundabout — in 2011.

“Staying with the status quo has a certain set of criteria” for the state to follow, said Steve Titus, who directs the Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities' northern regional office. A change, if it comes, to a roundabout carries different needs, he said. “DOT needs to stop or go.”

A roundabout would add \$2.8 million to the rebuild of Illinois Street, state transportation engineer Dave Bloom said. Building it as part of the Illinois Street project would cost only half as much as doing it later as a standalone project, he said.

The prospect of more two-way traffic south of the Chena River, and of an accommodating roundabout to the north, emerged in 2007 as a linchpin of the Vision Fairbanks downtown revitalization plan. Proponents of the plan have cited its potential benefits to downtown's atmosphere and quality of life and economy.

The seven-member Fairbanks Metropolitan Area Transportation Systems Policy Committee voted 6-1 Tuesday to wait a month before deciding whether to follow Kinney's recommendation. The decision could help decide the fate of the Big I, which could be razed to prepare for the road project — a certainty if a roundabout is built.

The policy committee has shown a divide about the issue.

“I believe this is the beginning of spending millions and millions of dollars on a vision that will not work,” Chad Roberts, the Fairbanks City Council’s representative on the committee, said of the Vision Fairbanks plan.

Roundabouts are common around the world, used to direct traffic without the need for lit signals. The official plans to rebuild Illinois Street include a signal at what will be a five-way intersection when the project is complete.

Kinney’s recommendation comes under the assumption that roads south of the river — namely, Barnette and Cushman streets — will eventually run two-way, firm owner Randy Kinney said on Tuesday. If they remain one-way, a traffic signal would be best, according to a summary of the firm’s analysis.

Luke Hopkins, the Borough Assembly’s representative on FMATS’ committee, formally asked the board Tuesday to steer the Illinois Street project toward the roundabout. Hopkins said the analysis and other evaluations led him to believe “the roundabout is the solution that should be brought forward.”

Borough Mayor Jim Whitaker — the area’s three mayors all sit on the seven-member committee — successfully postponed Hopkins’ request for an August committee vote.