

## Transportation officials drop downtown Fairbanks roundabout plan

FAIRBANKS — Transportation officials Wednesday directed the state to install a traffic signal at the southern end of Illinois Street during upcoming downtown road work.

In doing so, the group scrapped the prospect of building a two-lane traffic circle, a decision that also clouds City Hall's plan to return two-way traffic to major downtown streets south of the Chena River. And it means state-hired demolition crews will likely bypass the Big International Pub and Lounge, which would have been razed had a roundabout at the intersection been approved.

Two-way traffic and a roundabout on North Cushman Street had crept to the front of traffic talk after a downtown redevelopment plan materialized one year ago. Supporters saw the projects as interconnected.

Wednesday's wide-ranging actions sank the roundabout. The vote was taken by the seven-member Policy Committee for the Fairbanks Metropolitan Area Transportation System. Fairbanks city officials said they could also scuttle plans to convert Cushman and Barnette streets to two-way traffic downtown.

The committee, comprised of the Fairbanks area's three mayors and other local and state officials, voted 5-2 to abandon talk of a roundabout. Only Fairbanks Mayor Terry Strle and Fairbanks North Star Borough Assemblyman Luke Hopkins liked the prospect of the major downtown roundabout.

The group also voted 4-3 to plan for one-way traffic on bridges to the intersection's south.

The decisions were made during a two-hour discussion, at the committee's regular monthly meeting, of the Illinois Street Project — a broad, multimillion-dollar plan to rebuild Illinois and North Cushman streets during the next three or four years.

Borough Mayor Jim Whitaker, Fairbanks City Councilman Chad Roberts, state Division of Air Quality Director Alice Edwards, state Department of Transportation Northern Region Director Steve Titus and North Pole Mayor Doug Isaacson voted to reject the roundabout proposal. Hopkins had pitched the roundabout last month after public officials, residents and businesses raised the option during draft work on the now-adopted Vision Fairbanks downtown revitalization plan. A controversial option.

Talk of building a roundabout at the proposed Illinois Street Project's busiest point is, at one year old, a relative newcomer to the larger Illinois Street Project, which has been tweaked and tweaked again since planning began in the 1970s.

The latest proposed change had drawn criticism from businesses surrounding what will become a starfish-shaped, five-way intersection north of the Chena River.

Marilyn Romano, publisher of the Daily News-Miner, told Transportation Department officials Wednesday they'd failed to help businesses understand how the upcoming work will

impact access and parking. Jo Heckman, president of Denali State Bank, worried a roundabout could make it tougher for employees and tenants to reach her bank's Illinois Street headquarters.

South of the river, transportation managers have lined up roughly \$7 million to return Cushman Street — Vision Fairbanks' geographic focus — to two-way after a three-decade hiatus. City engineers and Strle said Wednesday's committee vote jeopardizes that plan.

Roberts, who has consistently criticized Vision Fairbanks as "flawed," successfully proposed one-way traffic for both bridges. A bigger plan.

Supporters of the downtown revitalization plan unsuccessfully asked the committee Wednesday to at least keep the option of a roundabout on the table. Architect Charles Bettisworth urged the group to think long-term when setting policy. He noted the downtown plan puts an emphasis on long-term economic development.

"I fully support the vision, and I think we need to move forward," Bettisworth said.

Construction on the second bridge could start next year. Work on the larger Illinois Street project could begin in 2011.

The Transportation Department said a roundabout would have required demolishing the Big I bar, while the traffic signal means the business should be able to stay. Big I owner John Jackovich said Wednesday's meeting alleviates his worries, although he said he must now deal with structural problems at the bar, problems that emerged during the state's preparation for the Illinois Street Project.

The Vision Fairbanks plan is a multi-agency effort coordinated by the Downtown Association of Fairbanks. Association Director David van den Berg said downtown Fairbanks has the community's only one-way streets. Drivers use them as throughways rather than slower-paced destination streets that invite prospective shoppers and retail investors, he said. FMATS leaders showed Wednesday they're disinterested in "solving that problem," he said.

Titus, who directs DOT's operations in and around Fairbanks, said a traffic signal will save the state money on right of way and construction. Strle criticized his approach, calling it a "classic example" of the state failing to listen to supporters of the Vision Fairbanks plan. She said the group should have at least preserved the option of a roundabout as the state advanced designs for the Illinois Street Project.

"It just shows me that DOT doesn't want to move forward," Strle said.

Whitaker said he hoped a traffic signal will hold construction costs low and minimize disruptions to neighboring businesses. He said the board's votes Wednesday won't hinder City Hall's plan to reintroduce two-way traffic to the south.

Whitaker also suggested the roundabout would sacrifice businesses for "aesthetic" benefits.