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Prospects dim for Darien's I-55 soundwall

By Lane Kelley

Staff writer

Support for a proposed sound wall along Interstate 55 in Darien is crumbling, according to a resident leading the drive.

A survey asking residents if they wanted to pay for the wall through a special tax assessment was supposed to be hand-delivered during December and January to all of the approximately 400 homeowners who would be affected. But Joan Wayman, a resident leading the push for a wall, said she and her group decided to mail the survey because of the winter weather.

As of Feb. 8, the survey forms had not been mailed, she said. Wayman said the residents asked the city of Darien to provide a mailing list of residents, but the city has not done so.

"They are obviously not interested in this project," Wayman said. "We were hoping to get more cooperation."

Scott Coren, assistant to city administrator Bryon Vana, said he knew nothing about providing a mailing list.

"We're waiting for the results of the survey," Coren said. "We're going to wait for them to bring the results of the survey to us."

In December, the city approved a straw poll that would be delivered to about 370 residents in south Darien asking them if they want to pay for a wall through a special assessment. The survey wanted to know how much residents would feel comfortable paying. The survey asked residents to check how much more they would be willing to pay, from \$500 up to \$2,500 annually over the next 20 years.

Funding for the wall has always been the crucial issue. In many towns with such barriers along an interstate, such as Hinsdale, the structure is paid for with state and federal cash when the highway is rebuilt or widened. In Darien, the city couldn't begin to fund it. A study reviewed by the City Council in December laid out a project priced at \$7.36 million, which is half of the town's \$14 million annual budget.

The federal government agreed to put up \$1.4 million for the project, but that money has strings attached -- the city and state each have to kick in 5 percent shares. And it still leaves well over half of the cost of the project unfunded.

Wayman said the possibility of paying for the wall with a special tax didn't go over that well with her neighbors.

"We're not throwing in the towel altogether," Wayman said. "But interest has definitely waned."

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