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Sound wall funding at stake in city

By Lane Kelley

Staff writer

Darien city officials last week began studying how residents who want a sound barrier along Interstate 55 might pay for it themselves, with a little help from the feds.

At a City Council meeting Nov. 21, city attorney John Murphey explained that a special tax assessment to residents who live in the area could pay for the wall, which in one scenario would extend for five miles along the busy expressway.

"It's a unique form of democracy," Murphey said, relating how residents might approve -- or veto -- paying for the project through a tax on themselves spread out for as long as 20 years.

There are 373 households in the area on the north and south sides of I-55 that would benefit from the sound wall, according to Scott Coren, assistant to the city administrator. Those residents will be polled in coming weeks to see if they would approve of a special assessment. Coren said the city needs to know how strongly residents want the wall before an engineering study takes place.

"We don't want to spend \$35,000 on an engineering study if the wall is not going to go up," Coren said.

Darien officials approved an agreement Sept. 6 with the Illinois Department of Transportation for a sound wall to be placed along a stretch of I-55 extending from Alabama Street to Lemont Road on the north side, and from the Darien Woods area to the Waterfall Glen townhomes on the south side.

Residents' biggest complaint is the noise from cars and trucks on the freeway, but they also complain about safety issues, such as tires flying into back yards and stranded drivers knocking on doors late at night. A wall separating the expressway from adjacent residential or commercial areas would help solve the sound and safety issues, they contend.

The problem with the project is not whether the wall is necessary but who will foot the bill.

The prevailing estimate city officials cite is \$1 million a mile, which brings the cost of the longest wall under discussion to at least \$5 million, and probably more. Darien can't pay for it, which raises the question of how much the residents will pay and how much will come from state and federal funds.

So far, the federal government has agreed to put up \$1.4 million for the wall. U.S. Rep. Judy Biggert, R-13th District, of Hinsdale, helped the city obtain the money last year -- but the grant has strings attached. The federal funds are

available only if the city of Darien kicks in 5 percent, or roughly \$70,000, and if the state matches the city's share, Coren said.

So the city of Darien now wants to find out if residents in the area really want to pay for a wall. The final decision could come down to a few homeowners.

If the straw poll residents are conducting now shows solid support for the wall, the next move is for the City Council to pay for an engineering study and start the public hearing process.

Residents would be notified by the city about hearings on the special service area and get a chance to speak. Murphey said that, because property owners in the area would have to pay for the wall, they must be notified about a pending tax increase.

"It's impossible for this one to fly under the radar screen," Murphey said.

However, property owners and residents will not necessarily get to vote on whether they want the wall.

Murphey said the straw poll will give the council an idea of community support. But if the council decides to move forward on the wall, the only way residents can stop it is through a "veto petition," as Murphey called it.

The veto petition, as defined by state law, would require that at least 51 percent of the voters, and 51 percent of the property owners in the area, disapprove of a tax on themselves for the wall. Murphey said the reason for the separate distinctions is that, while most homeowners are voters, some property owners -- those owning commercial property, for example -- live outside the affected area.

Joan Wayman, a resident who has led the drive for a wall, told the City Council she has the backing of 150 residents, though she acknowledged that those who live in unincorporated areas could kill the project.

Wayman said residents should realize that the federal money already earmarked for the wall could go elsewhere if the wall proposal is defeated.

"If we walk away from it, another district is going to get that money, and that would be silly," Wayman said.

Some residents are skeptical. Jim Tikalsky, a former Darien alderman who lives in the area, said he wants the wall but thinks it will prove too costly for residents to pay for themselves -- even those affluent enough to pay \$10,000 a year in property taxes.

"If it costs them \$100 a year over 20 years, they might go for it," Tikalsky said. "But the reality is, it may cost them \$1,000 to \$2,000 a year."

Tikalsky said he believes the state should bear 100 percent of the cost.

"This is a state issue," Tikalsky said. "They need to step up to the plate."

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