

12/18/05

Survey to gauge tax support for wall along Interstate 55

By Lane Kelley

Staff writer

Residents in south Darien will start knocking on doors soon to deliver a survey asking their neighbors if they're willing to pay for a sound wall along Interstate 55.

The survey will be hand-delivered to each of the 373 property owners on the north and south sides of I-55 city officials have estimated would benefit from the anti-noise barrier. The city wants to see if a majority of residents will pay for the wall through a special tax assessment.

"I think the survey is key right now," Mayor Kathleen Weaver said at the Dec. 6 City Council meeting. "It has to be a citizen-driven process."

The wall, according to a September agreement approved by Darien officials, would be built along a five-mile 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. But those boundaries could change, depending on the results of the straw poll.

Barriers along highways are common in many towns to block vehicle noise, to prevent tires and other debris from flying into back yards, and to discourage stranded drivers from knocking on doors late at night.

But such walls are costly, and Darien's project could prove to be too expensive. The proposed barrier could run \$5 million, based on a prevailing rule of thumb estimate of \$1 million per mile, and it most likely would top that figure. A study reviewed by the City Council this month laid out a plan priced at \$7.36 million. That study, done by Huff & Huff Inc. in 2004, divided the project into four sections and said two of them were not "economically reasonable" because too few homes would benefit.

The federal government has agreed to put up \$1.4 million for the project, but there are 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.

Residents in south Darien would be asked to pay for the wall through a special assessment. The straw poll wants to know their financial comfort level, asking if the resident is willing to pay at least \$500 more in annual property taxes over the next 20 years. The survey asks residents to check how much more they would be willing to pay, from \$500 up to \$2,500 more annually.

"The city of Darien will use this nonbinding survey to determine if sufficient interest exists from the property owners to finance the project," the survey states.

Joan Wayman, a resident who has led the drive for a barrier, told council members last week that putting the financial burden on property owners to pay for a huge chunk of the wall has placed residents "between a rock and a hard place." Wayman wishes the city would make the barrier a higher fiscal priority because she says it will provide benefits for more people than just its neighbors.

"People drive through Hinsdale and Western Springs, and they think, 'Wow, these places must be important,'" Wayman said. "Well, if you put up this wall, it benefits the south half of Darien as a whole."

Frank Prezzia, a resident who would benefit from a barrier, said the city should ante up.

"I know they've got the money," Prezzia said. "I think they should allocate some real money for it."

That's not possible, says Alderman Joe Marchese, Fifth Ward. Marchese said Darien's \$14 million annual budget is too small to even consider paying for a \$7 million-plus wall. Marchese said the city will look at the results of the straw poll in February or March. Aldermen will then decide whether the results show that enough residents are willing to pay for a barrier.

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