

Residents: Have support for noise wall

By Lane Kelley

Staff writer

Darien city officials contend there's little backing for a long sound barrier along Interstate 55, but residents pushing for a shorter version said many of their neighbors are willing to help pay for it.

Resident Jeff Mueller, who reviewed a survey he recently took among his neighbors for the City Council on July 17, said he found that 72 percent of the homeowners living along the expressway between Lemont Road and Cass Avenue are willing to pay for such a barrier through higher property taxes.

Mueller, neighbor Joan Wayman and other residents in the area said expressway noise is one of their recurrent problems. They also have to deal with flying tires landing in their yards and stranded drivers knocking on their doors late at night, they said.

Their immediate goal is to get the city to find out what a wall about a mile long from Lemont to Cass would cost by paying \$35,000 for an engineering study.

"We'd like to move forward with that engineering study," Mueller said.

The City Council deferred the decision until its next meeting in August.

The city and the residents have been on different sides of the issue because of the barrier's cost. City officials contend they cannot pay for all or even a significant percentage of it. Most towns that have such barriers along an interstate -- such as Hinsdale's wall along the Tri-State Tollway -- got the structure paid for totally with state and federal cash when the roadway was rebuilt or widened.

IDOT is extending the North-South Tollway across Interstate 55 to a link with Interstate 80, which affects Woodridge but not Darien. And Darien Public Works Director Dan Gombac told Mayor Kathleen Weaver at the meeting that he's been told by state officials that the stretch of I-55 in Darien is "not on the radar" for any work for at least a decade.

But Mueller and his neighbors said there's already a sizable chunk of state money available for the wall and have pressed the city to use \$1.4 million it received from the Illinois Department of Transportation for the project.

Yet the problem with the IDOT money is that city officials said it has strings attached and is not nearly enough to pay for what was first proposed as a 5-mile wall.

The rule of thumb for estimating the cost of such barriers used to be \$1 million a mile, but city officials now say it could cost up to twice that much. A

study reviewed in December laid out a 5-mile project priced at \$7.36 million.

There are about 370 residents who would possibly benefit from a 5-mile wall. Earlier this year only a few residents responded to a survey asking them about paying for a wall through a special taxing district. Weaver and City Administrator Bryon Vana said in June there is little support among the residents to pay for it themselves.

So Mueller and his neighbors are focusing on getting a smaller barrier, from Lemont to Cass, which would be about a mile long. Mueller said he sent surveys to about 100 of his neighbors, which is only a little more than a quarter of all residents who live along the stretch of I-55 at issue.

"No one from the other sections have stepped up and expressed interest," Mueller said. "So we're going to focus on those who want a wall."

At least one resident who lives near I-55 told the City Council she opposes a barrier. Irene Tomaskovic said she was told by Vana's assistant, Scott Coren, that the special assessment for a sound barrier might run \$1,000 a year for many residents.

"I have not heard one of my neighbors with a positive feedback about this wall," Tomaskovic said. "I haven't heard anyone who's willing to put up money."

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