

Citizens share comments, concerns on Nizhoni Boulevard construction

Written by By Holly J. Wagner Sun Correspondent
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Gallup citizens recently got a chance to speak up and share their opinions about the major construction project on Nizhoni Boulevard.

During the May 22 informational meeting about the construction that's about to begin on East Nizhoni Boulevard, a few people objected to the design plan for the new road, which will see Nizhoni Boulevard between Second Street and College Drive reconfigured from a four-lane road with two lanes in each direction into a three-lane road with one travel lane in each direction and a bidirectional center lane for left turns. Bike lanes will be added along the right side of the road in both directions.

The project is the third phase of a plan to upgrade Nizhoni Boulevard. Phase 1 included the intersection of Second Street and Nizhoni Boulevard; Phase 2 worked on the intersection of College Drive and Nizhoni Boulevard; Phase 3 will replace the road between them.

By the time the project is finished, the existing sidewalks will be replaced with ADA-compliant six-foot-wide sidewalks, plus new drivepads, curbs, gutters and sections of block wall. The utilities underneath will get upgraded to eight-inch PVC water and sewer lines and 12-inch PVC effluent lines.

The work will necessitate closing the northbound lanes for the first half of the project, when utility work will be done deep underground before surface improvements, and the southbound lanes for the second half. That takes two of the current four lanes out of service and pushes traffic into the remaining two lanes. Crews are set to begin setting up traffic controls May 30.

The city council awarded the nearly \$6 million Nizhoni construction contract to Murphy Builders

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at its March 14 meeting. The job is expected to take 240 calendar days, so it should wrap up next January, unless weather conditions prolong it.

DePauli Engineering representative Matt Long sought to ease meeting attendees' concerns about the inevitable inconvenience of construction and reduced speeds during construction.

"If there is an issue, come talk with us, if there is a truck in the way or whatever," Long said.

Long noted that the safety of the workers and the public is the construction company's top concern.

Some participants were concerned about the safety of the new design, especially in regards to emergency vehicles around Rehoboth McKinley Christian Hospital and Gallup Indian Medical Center. The road is also a main route to the University of New Mexico-Gallup, the cancer center and many clinics and doctors' offices.

Engineers assured those in attendance that safety is the primary goal of the project, and plans are in place for emergency vehicles and other traffic issues during construction.

Several people expressed dismay that their comments at the May 22 meeting wouldn't influence the project. For example, some questioned the wisdom of adding bike lanes, which are included in response to both community preference and a recent state rule to expand bicycle access statewide.

The project is in District 3, City Councilor Sarah Piano's district. She attended the meeting to remain informed about the project. She noted that some of her constituents questioned the value of the meeting.

"People ask, 'what is the point of going to this meeting if we don't have any input?'" Piano said. "It's important for the public to understand this is not a simple project."

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The time to make preferences known for this project passed years ago. It takes years to take a major road project from an idea to reality. The planning stage typically takes more than a year, then local representatives have to get funding. Design and construction may take another year or two, depending on the project.

That means whatever the public says today won't show up as part of a road project for five years or more. When construction is about to start, it's too late for their comments to change anything.

In the last three months, the New Mexico Department of Transportation and the city have held public hearings for the planning stages of the state's Route 66 Improved and I-40 Corridor Study, both addressing those roads from the Arizona state line to Albuquerque, and the city's Transportation Master Plan, which covers all Gallup streets under city control. Those hearings drew just 35 to 50 citizen participants each. All three projects will have another hearing in the fall.

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