



DOT's new director proceeds with caution

By Charlene Bielema
Herald Editor

— CLINTON — The state's transportation director was in Clinton on Thursday, bringing kudos for the city's growing project list but tempering that with no promises to fulfill local officials' desire to start four-laning U.S. 30 from Ames to Clinton anytime soon.

Iowa Department of Transportation Director Nancy Richardson was the featured speaker at the Iowa/Illinois Highway Partnership meeting at the Clinton Country Club, but first got a trolley tour of the new projects taking place in Clinton. She was impressed by what she saw.

Richardson, who assumed the state transportation director post in October, remembered how several years ago she was in Clinton and took a boat trip with local officials. When she learned Thursday about all the projects under way — she was introduced to 19 in the Clinton, Camanche and Fulton, Ill., area — she sensed a momentum that wasn't present the last time around.

"I've got to tell you — the sense of excitement and energy compared to that of a few years ago, it's pretty amazing," she said. "To me what has occurred in the past decade is phenomenal. Other cities are aspiring to be like Clinton."

She said many communities are fighting to get projects to do. Not only does this area have them, but there are so many that prioritization is key.

"That doesn't just happen," she said, adding local cities have successfully moved out of survival mode and have grown to become flourishing communities. "You need to pat yourselves on the back."

She also is impressed Clinton has taken advantage of many state programs, such as Vision Iowa, DOT funds, the Iowa Values Fund and Iowa Financing Authority funding. Clinton also has put in an application for the first round of Iowa Rail Financing Authority monies.

"What that tells me is there is excitement and energy in Clinton," she said.

She said it also shows Clinton has assertive leaders who know how to make programs work to their advantage.

"You've got to go after them," she said of those dollars.

One item for which local leaders are lobbying is the four-laning of U.S. 30.

Edith Pfeffer, president of the Highway 30 Coalition, urged Richardson to make sure the four-laning happens. She said local officials will continue to seek federal funding and asked Richardson to keep bringing the four-lane message back to state transportation commissioners.

"I understand the importance of Highway 30," Richardson assured the crowd, pointing out that Clinton's Liberty Square project was put on the five-year plan in November and was one of three U.S. 30 projects to make the list at that time. There were 11 projects in all, she said.

But she acknowledged it's getting harder to get work done as the costs of construction and fuel continue to climb while at the same time funding mechanisms, such as the state road use tax funds, remain flat.

Those numbers have caused the DOT to continue to evaluate its to-do lists, both its annual work and the development of its next five-year plan, and to focus on stewardship as opposed to new projects.

In fact, the 2007 project list had to be trimmed, with those cuts recently announced. While Richardson said the changes did not have a negative impact on Clinton, she said they will have a ripple effect throughout the state in upcoming years.

That worried some members of the crowd, who wanted to know if Liberty Square is considered a new project or one of stewardship. Richardson said it is considered a new project, but don't think it means that it is "the low-hanging fruit" that will fall from the tree, she said.

She said corridors will be the first priority. Upgrades to 50-year-old Interstate 80 also are something that must be done, she said. One of the DOT's main focuses now is to do a study of the state's infrastructure needs, with a report due to the Iowa

Legislature by the end of December. That study will look at the county, city and state transportation systems and what it will cost to take care of needs. How to grow revenues also will be included in the study. Richardson said the goal is to present options to the Legislature as it works to allocate funding.

She is urging for a single, unified voice when it comes to declaring what those needs are.

“Everybody can’t have everything they want,” she said.

She said that’s why it’s important for local officials to make their wishes known by talking to legislators. She also will be meeting with Illinois Department of Transportation Director Tim Martin about border issues. It is a discussion that will include talk about U.S. 30, since Illinois leaders want to four-lane U.S. 30 from Fulton to Rock Falls, Ill.

Cooperation on all fronts will be the key to success, she said.

“In order to make progress from stem to stern we have to plug away at it,” she said. “It takes time. It takes patience.”

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Photos



Iowa Department of Transportation Director Nancy Richardson (right) talks with Camanche Mayor Jim Robertson (left) and Clinton Mayor LaMetta Wynn on Thursday during a meeting of the Iowa/Illinois Highway Partnership.