**By Brett Blocker**

**Editor**

Following months of discussion with members of the community, business leaders and elected officials, the Minnesota Department of Public Transportation (District 8) has released four concept proposals regarding the Highway 23 and 9 safety improvement project: An interchange, J-turn, single-lane roundabout and traffic signal.

This project seeks to construct a safer alternative to the accident-prone inter-section of Highway 23 and 9 near the Country Stop in New London.

Although MnDOT had initially planned to construct a J-turn at the location during the 2022 construction season, the department instead chose to pursue a new solution after significant push-back from the New London City Council and the public at large, who expressed concern that the J-turn would not resolve the intersection’s safety issues.

With the J-turn project halted, MnDOT sought to re-engage the public for input on a new solution. In March of this year, the department hired Pamela Whitmore, of Whitmore Resolution Group, to help create an advisory committee to MnDOT. This committee consists of roughly a dozen represen-tatives, including individuals from the City of New London, Kandiyohi County, local residents, the NLS school district, area business owners, fire and EMS, and those involved in freight and commerce.

The committee – which has been meeting since April of this year – serves to analyze potential safety solutions, consider public feedback, and, ultimately, make a recommendation to MnDOT on a safety solution that can be implemented in the coming years.

As a result of these meetings, MnDOT has now whittled down proposals for the intersection to four main options: an interchange, J-turn, single-lane roundabout and traffic signal.

Although a public open house had been scheduled for Tuesday, August 9 at Peace Lutheran Church in New London, where MnDOT officials would be present to present and discuss the project, the department cancelled the meeting as the date conflicted with the primary election. This meeting has been rescheduled for Wednesday, August 31 from 4-5 p.m. at the church.

According to Ryan Barney, MnDOT District 8 Project Manager, a date on which one of the four options will be selected has not yet been set, though one could be made by the end of this year. However, he said, this date will depend on feedback from the upcoming open house and input gathered from additional public engagement opportunities to come.

“We have to take it one step at a time. So we’re going to see what comes out of the public open house, bring that back to the advisory group, and from there, determine what our path is moving forward.”

Construction dates, too, are unknown at this time, as they are dependent on which option is selected.

In addition, project costs vary significantly between the four proposed options, and construction is contingent on available funding. As such, “We haven’t quite determined the cost splits between the public agencies yet,” he said, when asked whether the city, county or state will cover the bulk of project costs. Funding applications through state and federal agencies are “typically quite competitive” for larger projects, “so this will depend once again on which option [is selected.]”

Preliminary details of the four proposed projects are as follows:

**Interchange**

Project description: The inter- section of Highways 23 and 9 would be redesigned with a bridge over Highway 23, as well as a ramp access to and from Highway 23. County Road 40 also would be realigned to connect to Highway 9. The east leg of County Road 40 would be realigned to connect to Highway 9 and a cul-de-sac would be constructed on existing County Road 40 east of Highway 23. The west leg of County Road 40 would be converted to a “right in/right out” at Highway 23. A Highway 9 bridge would include a trail across Highway 23 for people who walk and bike.

According to MnDOT, this project would take the longest to develop and is the most expensive of the four options, with estimates ranging from $20-26 million. With limited funding sources available, it could take up to 10 years or longer to secure funding, and five or more years to construct once funding is secured.

MnDOT data indicates this design would result in a 77% reduction in serious and fatal crashes compared to the existing intersection design.

**J-turn**

Project description: The inter-section of Highways 23 and 9 would be redesigned so that vehicles can no longer make a left turn onto Highway 23 or drive straight across the highway. The east leg of County Road 40 would be realigned to connect to Highway 9, and a cul-de-sac would be constructed on existing County Road 40 east of Highway 23. The west leg of County Road 40 would be converted into a “3/4 intersection,” with only the left turn from County Road 40 onto Highway 23 restricted. A trail and pedestrian underpass would be constructed under Highway 23 for people who walk and bike.

 Compared to the previously proposed J-turn, Barney said, “the main difference is that the right-turn lanes are extended slightly, so if you’re making a turn, you can go right into the turn lane.” In addition, an offset right turn would be added, “so if you’re going toward Spicer, or coming back from Hawick and wanting to make a right turn into New London, [the offset right turn] pushes vehicles over about 15 feet. So if someone is sitting at the stop bar at the Country Stop, they won’t have to look at a blocked view. We’d be pulling that right-turn lane closer to the concrete plant so they won’t have to look over at that right-turn lane.”

 MnDOT data indicates a J-turn such as this results in a 69% reduction in fatal and serious injury crashes compared to the existing design of the Highway 23 and 9 intersection.

 With various funding sources available, it could take “up to two years or longer” to secure funding for the project and an additional 1.5-2.5 years to construct once funding is secured.

 Project costs are estimated to range between $7-10 million.

**Single-lane roundabout**

Project description: The intersection of Highways 23 and 9 would be redesigned to accommodate a roundabout. The east leg of County Road 40 would be realigned to connect to Highway 9 and a cul-de-sac would be constructed on existing County Road 40 east of Highway 23. The west leg of County Road 40 would be converted into a “3/4 intersection,” with only the left turn from County Road 40 onto Highway 23 restricted. A trail and pedestrian underpass would be con-structed under Highway 23 for people who walk and bike.

 MnDOT data indicates this roundabout would result in an 83-86% reduction in fatal and serious crashes com-pared to the existing design of the intersection – making it the safest of the four options listed.

 With various funding sources available, it could take “up to two years or longer” to secure funding for the project, and an additional 2.5-3.5 years to construct once funding is secured.

 Project costs are estimated to range between $7-10 million.

**Traffic signal**

 Project description: A traffic signal would be installed at the intersection of Highways 23 and 9. The east leg of County Road 40 would be realigned to connect to Highway 9, and a cul-de-sac would be constructed on existing County Road 40 east of Highway 23. The west leg of County Road 40 would be converted into a “3/4 intersection” with only the left turn from County Road 40 onto Highway 23 restricted. A trail and pedestrian underpass would be con-structed under Highway 23 for people who walk and bike. The current inter-section would need to be rebuilt and leveled to remove bumps and dips so that vehicles can cross Highway 23 between Highway 9 and County Road 40.

 While Barney said the installation of a traffic signal was listed as one of the four options due to its suggestion by numerous members of the public, MnDOT data indicates a traffic signal at the inter-

section would result in a 28% increase in fatal and serious crashes compared to the existing design of the intersection.

 With limited funding sources available, it could take “up to five years or longer” to secure funding, and an additional 2.5-3.5 years to construct once funding is secured.

 Project costs are estimate to range between $10-14 million.