

Mall removal approved for Atchison

(KAIR)--No public voices of opposition, or support, were heard prior to Tuesday's Atchison City Commission approval of moving forward with the removal of Atchison's downtown mall.

The 3-1 vote to approve entering into a Kansas Department of Transportation Cost Share Program Grant Award Agreement means the future conversion of the 500 and 600 blocks of Commercial Street from the existing pedestrian mall into what the City calls "a streetscape concept similar to what exists in the 100 through 300 and the 700 and 800 blocks of Commercial Street."

The project was one of only 22 in the state selected to receive grant funds, with \$1.45 million awarded to the City of Atchison, which is 75-percent of the projected \$2 million project.

Assistant Atchison City Manager Justin Pregont told the Commission, prior to Tuesday's vote, that the price tag for the City is projected to be \$500,000 or \$600,000.

The matter was brought before the Commission following discussions with those who will be affected by the construction, and Pregont explained that the timeline for the work is planned to have the least amount of negative impact on mall-area business owners. "The date that's in the agreement is June 2020," Pregont said. "We are obligated to let that project within six-months of June of this year, which means that we could design it really quickly and get going, but it seems like the consensus of the stakeholder group is to take our time, do a thorough job, be communicative and transparent with everyone that's considered a stakeholder and we'd be looking more at a letting date that's more in the early October range, maybe even later September. That would allow this City Commission to consider a construction contract maybe in early October. That would lead us to a start date that would absolutely avoid the holiday season, which is one of the biggest, and most important, pieces of feedback we got from the retailers."

Questions were posed by Commissioners following Pregont's presentation, including those from Commissioner J. David Ferris, who cast the lone no vote. "The way I stand on the mall is I've walked on it for more years than a couple of our Commissioners have been alive and about 90-percent of the staff...even though you can't change my mind, I think you've done some outstanding working putting this together."

Mayor Shawn Rizza said he believes the move is good for Atchison's economic future, adding that the City will explore ways to provide financial assistance for

businesses impacted by the project. “This is about making Atchison the best option to start a business...we want to make sure we’re keeping it friendly to the ones that we’ve already got.”

According to a City Staff report, allowing thru traffic where the mall now stands “is a better conduit for investment and economic activity than a pedestrian mall given the demographics and relative lack of density in downtown Atchison.”

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