

I-49 project not expected soon

BY RICHARD BURGESS
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LAFAYETTE — The state's transportation chief gave little encouragement Monday that Interstate 49 through Lafayette will be completed anytime soon.

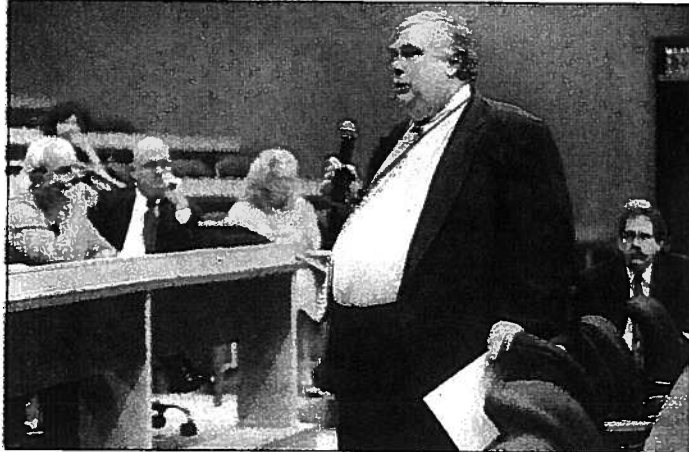
"We've got a system that does not have enough money to take care of what's existing," state Department of Transportation and Development Secretary William Ankner told a meeting of Lafayette traffic and planning officials Monday.

Ankner had accepted an invitation from the group to answer several questions about funding the I-49 connector — a proposed six-lane, elevated freeway that would roughly follow Evangeline Thruway from Interstate 10 to the Lafayette Regional Airport.

The project is estimated to cost about \$700 million.

Road funding in Louisiana was tight before the economic crisis, but Ankner said road funds — supported in part by gas taxes and sales tax on new vehicles — are hurting now that people are using less fuel and buying fewer cars.

And the lean economic times will most likely make it tougher to secure the federal money needed to fund the I-49 connector and other major highway projects.



Advocate staff photo by BRYAN TUCK

Louisiana Secretary of Transportation William Ankner speaks at a meeting of the Lafayette Metropolitan Planning Organization on Monday at the LITE Center. Ankner spoke about the proposed I-49 extension through Lafayette Parish.

"What the future of federal funding will be is certainly unknown," Ankner said.

The first in a series of written questions submitted to Ankner by the local officials asked: "What is your approach in advancing the I-49 connector through Lafayette recognizing the shortage of funding?"

His answer: "I don't know," followed by a detailed explanation of how little money he has to work with considering the state's long list of transportation needs.

Possible funding sources include future state surpluses and revenue from offshore oil

production in federal waters, but the transportation department is not guaranteed a share of those funds.

Ankner said funding for the connector is up against many other priorities in the state.

"We have a lot of heavy duty competition for any new capacity," he said.

Ankner also said he left a recent meeting in Lafayette with mixed impressions about whether the community viewed a proposed expressway loop around Lafayette being equal in importance to the I-49 connector.

"There is not consensus in

Lafayette as to what the priorities are," Ankner said.

In attempt to answer that concern, two traffic planning committees passed resolutions Monday identifying the I-49 connector and the extension of I-49 south of Lafayette "as the priority transportation improvement for the Lafayette Metropolitan Area."

The I-49 connector project, in one form or another, has been under discussion for more than 40 years.

Lafayette City-Parish Director of Traffic and Transportation Tony Tramel said the connector is the one project on the books that would have the most effect on traffic congestion in Lafayette.

That rank once belonged to Camellia Boulevard over the Vermilion River, a project that was finished in 2003 after being discussed for 50 years.

Tramel said about \$16 million has been spent so far on the I-49 connector project — \$8 million for engineering and another \$8 million to acquire rights of way.