

Highway 40 plan likely will be scaled back

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Missouri officials lack the money to build the Highway 40 project they showcased for the past year, and a scaled-down version might mean fewer improvements - from the upgrades planned for the Interstate 170 interchange to proposals adding more lanes and replacing bridges.

The Missouri Department of Transportation is at least \$17 million short, a spokeswoman acknowledged to the Post-Dispatch this week. The agency says it doesn't know which details will be left out.

The department is supposed to rebuild 12 miles of Highway 40 from west of Spoede Road in Frontenac to Sarah Street in St. Louis. MoDOT promises that the rebuilt highway, which is the most vital east-west route in the region, will be safer and more efficient for motorists. The project will be the state's grandest highway construction project to date.

The top official for the bistate's planning organization that approved MoDOT's plan, though, says the agency won't be building the project it promised in the first place.

The new Highway 40 that MoDOT is pitching would cost at least \$552 million, according to federal documents. And that doesn't include inflation. But MoDOT has vowed not to exceed a \$535 million budget.

"And we are going to get the most project we can get for that," MoDOT spokeswoman Linda Wilson said.

For now, though, Wilson concedes that the department doesn't know exactly what the \$535 million will buy.

Nothing prohibits MoDOT from spending more money and extending the construction schedule if it wants. But two construction teams are vying for the project, and the winner will be based largely on the one that can get the most bang for the buck.

One area that perhaps needs the most critical work is the Highway 40 and Interstate 170 interchange, where the worst backups occur.

Improvements at that interchange still will be made to reduce congestion, but Wilson didn't know to what extent.

"I think it's fair to say it's not necessarily going to look like what's in the

environmental document," she said.

That document, an Environmental Impact Statement, is the federally required plan MoDOT is showing residents and businesses.

"I think it's important to understand that an (Environmental Impact Statement) represents the ultimate project you could possibly build," Wilson said. "We have to show people the most impact a project could have on people."

East-West Gateway Council of Governments, the region's planning organization, approved the \$535 million budget last July. Any time federal money is spent in a multijurisdictional metropolitan area, the region's planning organization has to approve it.

East-West Gateway executive director Les Sterman said MoDOT promised it could build Highway 40 for \$535 million because it was using a cheaper and faster design-build approach, which allows one company to draw the plans and build it.

"In essence, they came to us and said, 'Suppose we could build the project for less money and in less time,'" Sterman said in an e-mail interview. "That was obviously an attractive deal, one that we couldn't refuse.

"It turns out, though, that they are not likely going to build the project that we thought, but something less than that."

Sterman speculated that the downsized project could affect several key components, such as interchanges at Lindbergh Boulevard, I-170, Hampton Avenue and Kingshighway.

A St. Louis County task force report released last month said MoDOT might be able to build the highway under budget if the department demolishes and rebuilds one side at a time while motorists have access to the other side. Doing so would speed up the work, among other things.

But Garry Earls, St. Louis County's director of public works, said he's not clear on MoDOT's funding and wonders if the agency is prepared to spend more money. Because the project is design-build, it doesn't go to the lowest bidder, and the entire scope of it is negotiable, Earls said.

If MoDOT doesn't have enough money and won't spend more, Earls said he could only speculate on what MoDOT might have to leave out.

"MoDOT will not talk to me about that subject," Earls said. "That's a very sensitive subject to them."

MoDOT expects to select a project team and release to the public the outline of the plans by December. The department plans to break ground by next spring. MoDOT has promised the work will be finished by October 2010.

MoDOT can't release many of the details of the project yet because of the competitive element involved in the teams' bidding process, Wilson said.

Whichever plan MoDOT decides on, motorists will be pleased, Wilson said.

"As a motorist, it's going to be in better shape, it's going to flow better and it's going to be safer."