

Oak Ridge's turnpike set for makeover

Long-delayed project will widen roadway, add more lanes

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OAK RIDGE - Delayed for years, a major overhaul of this city's main drag is now expected to begin this winter, an Oak Ridge official said Wednesday.

Bids on the conversion of a 4.2-mile stretch of Oak Ridge Turnpike into a four-lane roadway with median and bicycle paths on each side are to be opened in December, city engineer Steve Byrd said.

The project was to have begun in 2003 but has been repeatedly delayed.

"It has slipped and slipped and slipped," Byrd said of the timetable. "I can't get anybody to tell me why it's slipped."

State Department of Transportation representatives in Knoxville and Nashville were unavailable for comment Wednesday.

Byrd said with the project, a median would separate the four-lane turnpike from Westover Drive to the Jefferson Avenue intersection.

Plans call for a five-lane highway, with a center turn lane, from Jefferson Avenue to Illinois Avenue.

Construction is expected to last a minimum of two years, Byrd said.

The highway alignment was shifted a bit to the north to preserve 50 mature maple trees that line the south side of the turnpike, Byrd said.

Tree guards will be installed around more than a dozen of those maples to try to ensure their survival, he said.

The contractor that's awarded the bid will also relocate water lines and other utilities along the turnpike, Byrd said.

It would have cost Oak Ridge an estimated \$3.6 million to relocate the utilities, but a state law in 2003 shifted that cost to the state.

Another stretch of the turnpike, also known as State Route 95, was originally to have been reworked first.

Converting that 2.8-mile, two-lane stretch of turnpike from Westover Drive to the state Highway 58 interchange into a divided four-lane is now "not really scheduled before the end of 2008," Byrd said.