

# Broadway project RFQ spurs division on Shawnee City Commission

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The vote was four in favor, three against; those in opposition were Ward 3 City Commissioner James Harrod, Ward 5 City Commissioner Mark Sehorn and Ward 6 City Commissioner Ben Salter.

“The goal of this (Broadway) project will be to provide increased connectivity for active transportation, and traffic calming measures for safer streets for all types of transportation,” the agenda reads. “The plan will be developed in conjunction with the city and stakeholder groups/residents to provide a roadmap to improving pedestrian, cycling and motorist transit facilities, with a focus on implementing a model for future infrastructure improvements.”

Out of the five firms that submitted RFQs, staff evaluated the firms by the following criteria: professional relevancy of firm, example projects, proposed project timeline, project understanding, references and financial health of firm, Shawnee City Planner Rebecca Blaine’s memo to commissioners reads.

Freese and Nichols was ultimately chosen by Blaine, Shawnee City Manager Chance Allison and Shawnee Director of Engineering Michael Ludi.

“Freese Nichols had exceptional references and project reputations from working on projects with the City of Norman, Oklahoma County, Oklahoma Department of Transportation, City of Forth Worth and the City of Edmond,” she said.

Blaine said no formal design has been committed at this time.

“(Tuesday’s agenda item) decision is only to decide whether to hire a firm to create the right design for the people of Shawnee,” she said.

Ward 2 Shawnee City Commissioner Ron Gillham Sr. said the vote in no way makes the Broadway project itself a done deal.

“There are still negotiations and various other things, plus there’s independent voters — whoever may be on the commission at the time it comes up,” he said.

Blaine said the potential project as a whole would be funded by a 50/50 grant partnership with the Avedis Foundation — a cost estimated at \$1.2 million.

The design and engineering contract under discussion could run in the range of 20 percent of the project total, Blaine said, estimating high.

“I would say that is a realistic ballpark of the expectations,” she said.

The choice of firms, however, was not the subject of division among board members.

While city commissioners could agree they were all in support of the positive economic development aspect of the project, three on the panel were not convinced that the timing, priority or funding were justified — at least not right now.

Harrod said another large street improvement project — the downtown Streetscape project — was funded by TIF (Tax Increment Finance) District dollars.

“I want to point out there’s a difference in the funding,” he said. “Also, it was brought up tonight, we overspent our budget the last two or three years, from \$5 million to \$7 million depending on who you talk to; I’m not opposed to the project, but I am opposed to it at this time.”

He said he thinks the project would be an improvement for Broadway and a future improvement for Woodland Park, whenever that project is done.

“I’m opposed to any kind of activity that would remove any kind of parking off Broadway on either side,” Harrod said. “We sold bonds in 2018 to be able to do South Kickapoo; I don’t know what those costs were or how they’ve been expended to date, but I know that part of that cost was for the police station, library and community center, and things like that. But we’re still in the process of buying right-of-way for South Kickapoo at this time and we’re committed to that project.”

He said the city diverted some of the funds from the one-half cent sales tax to that project — and that tax was dedicated or pledged to 45th Street and for MacArthur.

“I would have to say, again, it’s fiscally irresponsible for this commission to even consider this project until we can get some money built back up into our fund so we can pay ourselves back,” he said. “We’re backing up future projects to pay for today’s projects; I don’t think, business-wise, it’s fiscally sound.”

He said he believes the project will end up costing closer to \$2 million.

“I don’t know that’s good fiscal responsibility,” Harrod said. “We’re still in the hole.”

Mayor Richard Finley’s urging, Allison confirmed the city has built its reserves back up considerably.

“We’ve had substantial recovery from the point Commissioner Harrod thinks we are,” Finley said. “We can’t have a plan — almost without exception — the people who live on Broadway and every person on this commission has said, ‘What’s the plan?’”

He said no one knows what the plan is until the community takes the first bite of the apple.

“It’s not like we’re deciding to spend \$1.2 million or \$1.8 million — this is a design phase and I think in order to answer the next question that it’s worth some amount of consulting fee to get those questions answered.”

He said he feels just as strongly — as strongly as Harrod is opposed — to move forward with that first bite.

Harrod said he believes it’s the commission’s responsibility to determine where parking begins and ends, etc. — not a decision for a design firm.

Finley said, “it is; and I expect them to bring a plan to us and we will sit down with residents and see if there’s anyway we can compromise or not, because to my knowledge at this point none of those discussions have been had.”

Finley said there’s an opposing group and an in-favor group, and those two groups are not talking.

“We don’t have anything to talk around at this point (without a plan of options),” he said. “Let’s put the plan together and begin to survey the residents up and down Broadway and see if there’s room for compromise or not; if there’s not, then we come back to this commission and you guys can vote no if you want to vote no.”

Salter said there are too many streets, curbs and gutters needing attention.

“We need to take care of those things,” he said. “The City of Shawnee residents were nice enough to us three years ago to give us another half-cent sales tax; one of the items on it was widening 45th Street.”

He said he doesn’t want to see that get put on the shelf for four or five years.

“I just don’t like the idea of dangling a carrot in front of my face and using city money and then anything that’s left over, we can use it for other projects,” Salter said.

At least some of the delay behind the 45th Street project is not the introduction of newer projects, but that the situation on 45th has changed since plans were made previously.

Allison said that improvements to 45th Street previously were to deal only with the intersections at 45th and Harrison and 45th and Kickapoo.

From Leo to Bryan will now have to be addressed, he said, due to current traffic, plus the new elementary school being planned in the area.

“The project is now beyond to scope of just intersections at this point,” he said. “We’re going to have to look at the whole roadway.

Pushing focus back to Broadway plans, Ward 4 Shawnee City Commissioner Darren Rutherford said, “We don’t know what (the Broadway improvements) will look like,” he said. “We don’t know what options are available; I’m not an engineer. I heard (Broadway has) 40-foot width of street; until we have engineering, what can you do with 40 feet? Can you maintain parking? Can you have a bike lane? Can you put lamp posts along the sidewalk? Can we do all of those or only do one or two?”

It can be improved, hopefully without negatively impacting people who live down the street, he said, “but we don’t know if that’s possible until we look at it.”

Rutherford said the commission is not voting to approve spending millions of dollars, it’s not voting to make people move off their street parking.

“We’re voting to see some possibilities on what we can do down that street,” he said.

On a final note at the end of the meeting, Finley offered his take on the role the Blue Zones Project serves.

“I’d like to address what Blue Zones is and is not,” he said. “You people that think Blue Zones is telling this commission or people in town what to do, are just nuts.”

He said he's been very close to meetings since the very beginning, when a local group from Shawnee visited Albert Lea, Minnesota, and looked at it.

"What Blue Zones does, at least in this community, is that they assimilate and disseminate information about how to make healthy choices in your life," he said, "now what you choose to do with that information is completely up to you."

He said the Blue Zones Project has tried to put together a wellness district, where the city can restrict outdoor smoking and some of those things.

"We all know the history of the science," he said. "We looked at the vaping issue, and the things this commission has done is we've endorsed certain policies that they've recommended; we've not passed any regulatory regime that I know of at all — and it's not likely that will happen."

He said residents can go on the internet and read about Blue Zones if they want to, or watch Ancient Aliens on the History Channel.

"I guess the choice is up to you," he said. "But, as far as the impact on this community, that's what they do, and their sole goal is to provide you with information on how to live longer and live healthier — and if you don't like that goal, I'm truly sorry for you."