

Last week, both the Central City Council and the Livingston Parish Council approved resolutions opposing the proposed Baton Rouge Loop, adding to the growing list of elected officials taking a stance against the controversial expressway.

The Baton Rouge Loop is proposed as an 85-to-90-mile, toll-funded beltway surrounding the capital and passing through five parishes: Ascension, Iberville, Livingston, and East and West Baton Rouge.

The \$4.5 billion project is expected to be funded through a public-private partnership, should it receive the necessary permits to move forward.

Earlier this month, the Ascension Parish Council was expected to vote on an anti-loop resolution, proposed by Ascension Councilman Randy Cloutre. However, some of the newly inaugurated council members asked to defer the item to give them time to study the issue.

Cloutre later said he plans to file a letter of opposition on behalf of the St. Amant-area council district, because one route for the proposed loop would run through that area. The parish councils of Iberville, West Baton Rouge and East Baton Rouge have not taken official positions on the loop, and are not required to.

The parish presidents in Iberville, Ascension and Livingston have expressed their opposition to the loop.

East Baton Rouge Mayor-President Kip Holden and West Baton Rouge Parish President Riley "Peewee" Berthelot continue to support the loop. They both serve on the Capital Area Expressway Authority, which is the legal entity overseeing the project.

East Baton Rouge Metro Council Mayor Pro Tem Mike Walker said the council is "keeping close tabs on the loop," but he added that he has not heard discussion of taking an official position.

Wayne Messina, the Central city councilman who proposed the anti-loop resolution for that governing body, said he wanted the City Council to take the position so it can be submitted into the project's official record.

The Expressway Authority is submitting the Tier 1 environmental impact study in an effort to receive a "Record of Decision" from the Federal Highway Authority, which amounts to a legal permit to move forward on the project, said Mike Bruce, a managing principal at ABMB, the lead firm working on the loop.

"The federal government wants to know how we feel, and now the city of Central has made a statement," Messina said.

While many people at the Central City Council meeting spoke in favor of the loop, Messina said, he still believes the majority of Central's residents oppose the project.

"Here in Central we love our way of life, our simple way of living, our country atmosphere. We have a right to tranquility," he said. "People in Central see that loop as destroying that, and we don't want it."

The Federal Highway Administration and the state Department of Transportation and Development take public input "very seriously" when considering projects to move forward, Bruce said. But he added that input is also weighed against other factors, such as benefits and impacts to the community.

Legally, the Expressway Authority cannot begin construction on a road project without approval from the municipal body governing the area, Bruce said.

But, Bruce said, if DOTD were to take the project on, the state agency would not be limited by those same restrictions.

"They build for the public good," Bruce said. "There's opposition to every project, and it grows and recedes over time."

The 25-mile northern bypass portion of the loop, which would go through Central, is already included in the state's long-term plan, meaning the bypass has the greatest chance of success despite local opposition, Bruce said.

The Central City Council vote was not unanimous. The vote was 3-2, with Messina, Tony LoBue and Ralph Washington supporting the anti-loop resolution. Louis DeJohn and Aaron Moak voted against it.

"The people of Central do not want that loop cutting us in half," Messina said. "Community first, then commerce."