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Engineering Consultant Selected For City's Interurban Trail Grant

By GEOFF FRANK

Regardless of their choice, Bluffton Board of Public Works and Safety members believed they would make a good decision.

A week after presentations by two firms on Bluffton's Interurban Trail project, board members still were impressed with what they had seen and heard.

While the vote was unanimous Tuesday afternoon to name the team of Butler Fairman & Seufert and Rundell Ernstberger Associates LLC as the city's design and engineering consultant, board members indicated they also would have been very confident in their second choice as well.

Both the Butler Fairman/Rundell team and The Schneider Corporation had made what Bluffton Mayor Ted Ellis termed "wonderful presentations" at last week's meeting.

Both of the finalists have extensive experience in trail projects and both have local ties.

Wells County commissioner Kevin Woodward was among those representing Indianapolis-based Schneider. The company does work in the county already with Wells County's GIS system.

Butler Fairman & Seufert maintains an office in Bluffton and the firm's local representative, Toby Steffen, was among those representing the firm last week. The company's local work has included the Dustman Road Project.

The project intent is to extend the Rivergreenway Trail underneath the Main Street Bridge and then northward as a walkway and bicycle route to Lancaster Elementary School on East Jackson Street (County Road 300N).

The city originally sent out requests for proposals to 40 companies. Seven proposals were received and board

members had narrowed the field to two through their initial review of the proposals.

Early in Tuesday's session, board of works members Melanie Durr, Ellis and Jim Phillabaum each wrote down their selection on a piece of paper so they would not sway each other through their discussion.

When the papers were turned over, each of the votes was for the Butler Fairman/Rundell team.

Ellis noted that Bluffton already has an existing relationship with Butler Fairman & Seufert.

Also, Durr said she was impressed with the architect for the successful team. He had a theme-based vision for the trail that gave Durr high hopes it will look like more than just a piece of asphalt heading north, she said.

In discussion that followed, Durr acknowledged that with all of the intersecting drives and other obstacles, it will be difficult to maintain the trail theme throughout the entire three-mile stretch.

Other challenges will include money, safety issues and time.

At last week's meeting, both firms indicated the project would be tight on money, despite the city's million-dollar grant.

The grant — federal money channeled through the Indiana Department of Transportation — represents 80 percent of the total project estimate of about \$1,250,000.

Both firms indicated they might need to trim some features to stay within budget for the three-mile trail.

Ellis recalled that when the project was first in the idea stages, it took the walkway to the north Bluffton area around the Wal-Mart store.

Since then, the city limits have moved north to encompass Lancaster Elementary School, resulting in a larger project that will squeeze fund limits.

At last week's meeting, Phillabaum expressed concerns about safety issues on how the project will intersect with busy traffic areas such as Dustman Road and the Wal-Mart area.

The railroad track area on North Main Street also was discussed regarding safety concerns.

There are a number of design features that can be adapted from experiences of other communities with

such paths to assist with safety concerns, board members were told last week.

Ellis believes the Butler Fairman/Rundell team may be overly optimistic on its estimate of being able to complete the project by September 2008.

"I think it will take the better part of four years," Ellis said Tuesday.

He expects obtaining right-of-way to be the critical path for the project.

The Butler Fairman/Rundell team plans to conduct a short-term route study to identify best options for the exact route of the trail, including where the path will cross North Main Street/Ind. 1.

One of the features believed to have helped the city in its grant application was that the project makes use of the historic route of the old interurban line.

Ellis said the operating assumption is that the trail would be on the west side of North Main Street between the bridge and Dustman Road and on the east side of the highway from Monroe Street (County Road 200N) to Jackson Street and the school.

The route study will look at those assumptions and also identify where the trail should cross Ind. 1. One suggestion has been that it follow the path of the old interurban line and cross in the general vicinity of the Willowbrook Addition.

In other business, board members Durr, Ellis and Phillabaum:

— Approved a permit request by Lisa Woods to locate a waste container at 927 South Morgan St. through March 31 for yard cleanup.

— Granted a permit request by James Thill to place a waste container at 512 S. Johnson St. from March 20 to April 20 for house demolition for remodeling.

— Indicated no objections to a request for two handicap parking spaces in front of a residence in the 500 block of South Indiana Street.

— Approved payment of accounts payable vouchers. Amounts totalled \$318,286.45 for civil city expenses and \$109,381.51 for utility accounts.

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