

Re: Ryan Henry Houston County News 02-20-2014

The retaining wall that hugs Minnesota Hwy. 44 on the south end of Hokah might be going away next summer, but a sentimental piece of the concrete barrier won't go down without a fight.

At the Hokah City Council meeting on Feb. 12, Minnesota Department of Transportation program engineer Anthony Wagner and project manager Jacob Gasper presented the department's plans to remove that retaining wall and replace it with a 1:3 grade slope loaded with vegetation and, after a long conversation, possibly a portion of the wall spray-painted with the words "Hokah Forever."

Much of the discussion was surrounding the preservation of that part of the wall, prompted by Councilor Jerry Martell. He said that slogan was too sentimental to the community to be torn down without some kind of option to replace it - either with the original painted concrete or a new slab a couple people could take some paint to.

The project, which was the subject of an open house in Hokah two weeks prior to the meeting, is fairly simple. The wall will be removed and replaced with the vegetative slope, according to the MnDOT officials, and in the process, the state will purchase easements on two portions of property near the wall, as well as an entire property just above it for state right-of-way.

It's slated to cost \$500,000 and work will begin in the summer of 2015. According to Gasper, it was the least expensive of the options to remedy the situation, which includes cracking and rotation in the wall, which has outlived its life expectancy. The cost to the city will be negligible, he said.

Martell said he wasn't aware of the property acquisition that will take an entire property was included in the plan until reading about it recently, and when the council was initially presented the plan, it wasn't included. He asked what changed.

Wagner said when it was initially scoped, the design wasn't nailed down with specific details. But as options availed themselves, it became more obvious the slope was a more feasible choice for a variety of reasons, such as cost (including the property acquisition) and maintenance.

But Martell's concern, from a financial standpoint, is that with the acquisition of a property of that size, the city would lose a significant chunk of taxable property. Above all, though, the concern he's heard most about from residents is the unknown fate of the wall.

"The wall itself has historical value to the city of Hokah," he said. "That's the wall they've been allow to vandalize with the 'Hokah Forever,' and that's one of the concerns. Some of the finest young ladies who ever came out of this town painted that wall with spray cans late at night. Has anyone discussed that wall with you guys?"

Wagner said his office did receive written comments about the wall following the open house, pointing out its sentimental value. Because the plan is to take right-of-way so far up the slope, Martell then asked if it was possible to recreate a sign in that area. Gasper said that's a possibility, but it would be up to the city what it wants to do - either place a new sign there or find a way to remove the original concrete before demolition.

"I'm talking about putting up another hunk of concrete wall and giving the kids in town some spray cans and we'll recreate 'Hokah Forever,'" Martell said. "It's Hokah."

He acknowledged that removing the wall as is, and intact, would be difficult, but possible; and he's inquired at a local business that said it'd be willing to help pull it off. Wagner said MnDOT wouldn't enter into a contract to help with salvage, but said the city could negotiate that with the contractor. Right-of-way to place the sign could be granted through a limited-use permit from MnDOT.

"I think we could discuss what some options might be," Wagner said. "But I think we would be looking for more input from the city."

Due to the property acquisition involved, MnDOT requested municipal consent from the council that night, meaning the city agrees to move forward with the plan while retaining the right to provide input throughout the process. To do so, the city would have to hold a public hearing to educate residents. Or, it could choose to wave that hearing and simply sign off.

Once it was determined the city would still have input into the project if it were to agree to wave the hearing and give its consent, the council voted unanimously to do so.

## Rodney Blank

Administrator  
City of Hokah  
102 Main Street  
P.O. Box 311  
Hokah, MN 55941

 **Work Tel#:** 507-894-4990  **FAX#:** 507-894-3777

 **Mobile Tel#:** 608-406-0089

 **E-Mail:** [rblank@acegroup.cc](mailto:rblank@acegroup.cc)

 **URL:** [www.cityofhokah-mn.gov](http://www.cityofhokah-mn.gov)