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Commission approves infrastructure financing for intermodal

By Jack Weinstein

Johnson County commissioners approved financing last week for public infrastructure improvements to accommodate the Gardner Intermodal Hub and Logistics park.

Commissioners voted 5 to 1 for the improvements "dubbed the Public Infrastructure Financing Plan" needed for the more than \$700 million project developed by Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway and The Allen Group on 1,000 acres at 191st Street between Waverly and Four Corners Roads. Commissioner John Toplikar was the only dissenting vote. Commissioner Ed Peterson was absent when the vote was taken.

A \$14 million design contract with Lenexa-based engineering firm Shafer, Kline and Warren, Inc. to remodel 191st from Gardner to Four Corners Roads was authorized by commissioners.

They also approved a measure to assist Gardner with finding funding to improve Waverly Road from 191st to U.S. Highway 56 and the South Waverly Bridge at an estimated cost of \$12.2 million. The Public Infrastructure Financing Plan and intention to annex the land was approved by Gardner city council members the week before. The annexation will take place within 45 days of approvals by all participants including the city, county, railroad and developer.

After the meeting Thursday, Commissioner John Toplikar, released a statement explaining his opposition.

"Never before in the history of this county have the people been asked to pay so much for a private development they never asked for," Toplikar said.

"For this reason I call for a public vote and referendum on public participation on any county financing plan concerning this development."

Toplikar added that more than 600 Gardner residents had signed a petition to oppose tax abatements granted to private developments at more than 30 percent. A 50 percent abatement has been proposed for the development.

In June, the Gardner Alliance for Equitable Taxation filed a civil suit against Gardner in Johnson County District Court to force the limitation of tax abatements provided by the city. That case was dismissed Sept. 24.

Another aspect of the Public Infrastructure Financing Plan called for the county to work with Gardner during the upcoming session of the Kansas Legislature to obtain an additional \$50 million in state bonds to fund other infrastructure around the development.

During the last session, Gov. Kathleen Sebelius vetoed a financing package that contained the bonds because it was included with legislation to build two coal-fired power plants near Holcomb. Construction of the Intermodal Hub and Logistics Park, which will include more than 7 million square feet of warehouse development, is slated to begin in early 2009 with completion in late 2010.

To accommodate increased truck traffic as a result of the development, the construction of a new interchange at an undetermined location will be paid for by the Kansas Department of Transportation.