

GDOT...from Page 1A

designated project will cost around \$100 million, and will widen SR 515/US 76 starting at Young Harris Street in Blairsville, across from the Home Depot, and running all the way to Timberline Drive in Young Harris, just before the Blue Ridge Mountain EMC headquarters, according to GDOT.

Furthermore, the project includes a two-lane City of Young Harris bypass beginning at Brasstown Creek Road, just past the Dollar General, and ending at Timberline Drive, with roundabouts featured at each end of the bypass, according to GDOT.

The project underwent preliminary engineering in 1999, then again in 2014, and is expected to undergo Right-of-Way Authorization this year to the tune of \$26,585,000, according to GDOT.

Construction is slated to begin in three years, and will cost right around \$63 million to complete, according to GDOT.

"The project will widen and reconstruct the existing two-lane with intermittent passing lanes roadway to primarily a four-lane divided highway," according to the latest available GDOT plans.

"The proposed project involves work along an 8.5-mile section of SR 515/US 76 beginning east of Blairsville from Young Harris Street to just east of Timberline Drive

Allegheny Spring BBQ April 28th

The Allegheny Spring BBQ will be held on Friday, April 28, 2017 from 11 a.m. - 3p.m. at the Allegheny Masonic Temple, 60-B Rogers Street, Blairsville, GA. Price for Whole Butts is \$32, and plates are \$7 each. (Plates: large BBQ sandwich, chips, dessert pie and drink). Dine in is available. Delivery is available within the city limits of Blairsville.

If ordering whole butt, please place your order with one of the contacts no later than April 20th: Ivy Smith (478) 731-6050; William White (478) 997-1011; Doug Shae (404) 556-3898; Ron Benfield (706) 897-5907; Bobby Overstreet (678) 409-7234.

in Young Harris.

"The new roadway consists primarily of a four-lane divided roadway (two lanes in each direction) with 32-foot median and 6.5-foot outside shoulders to accommodate bicycles.

"The project also includes a bypass around the City of Young Harris that consists of a two-lane roadway with roundabouts at each end.

"The right-of-way varies from 130 feet to 250 feet along the SR 515/US 76 mainline, and a right-of-way along the Young Harris bypass of between 80 feet and 100 feet."

According to GDOT documents, the major performance goal of the project "is to provide an acceptable LOS (Level of Service) for the future traffic demands along the corridor. The secondary benefits include the reduction of traffic accident frequency and severity, as well as provide better mobility through the addition of bike lanes and a bypass around Young Harris."

GDOT defines "Level of Service" as being "measured in terms of a number of factors, such as operating speed, travel time, traffic interruptions, freedom to maneuver and pass, driving safety, comfort and convenience."

GDOT has had to work around many considerations during the planning of this project.

"There are several issues of concern along the project corridor," according to GDOT documents. "These include the presence of warm water streams, cold water trout streams, wetlands, US National Forest property, historic properties, historic cemeteries, state-listed plant populations, and archaeologically-sensitive areas.

"The issues of concern are going to be addressed by this project in several ways, including the addition of landscaping and signing for Young Harris College inside both roundabouts, water quality measures for insects on which the endangered bats forage, as well as rare plant relocation of pink lady slipper orchids."

Continued the GDOT documents: "The issue most likely to affect the construction schedule is the potential presence of endangered Indiana or Long-Eared bats. This will limit land clearing activities to certain times of year. However, the most recent bat survey in the summer of 2015 did not find any endangered bats inside the project corridor."

GDOT officials will be holding an identical meeting in Young Harris, at the Towns County Recreation and Conference Center also on Thursday, April 6, from 4 p.m. to 7 p.m. The Rec Center is located at 150 Foster Park Rd. in Young Harris.

"The purpose of these Location and Design Public Hearing Open House meetings is to provide the public with an opportunity to view the project, ask questions and comment on the project," according to a GDOT notice. "Relocation assistance will be discussed at the Open House meetings. The information presented at each meeting will be identical. The Public is welcome to attend at either meeting location. Attendance at both locations is not required for the public to provide input on the proposed project."

Continued the notice: "The meetings will be informal, and the public is invited to attend anytime during these hours. There will be no formal presentation. A court reporter will be available to allow the public an opportunity to make verbal comments about the project."

The meeting sites are accessible to persons with disabilities, according to the notice, and accommodations for people with disabilities can be arranged with advance notice by calling GDOT's Kim Coley at (770) 531-5748.

Written statements will be accepted concerning this project until Thursday, April 20, 2017, and may be submitted to: Mr. Eric Duff, State Environmental Administrator, Georgia Department of Transportation, 600 West Peachtree Street, NW - 16th Floor, Atlanta, Georgia 30308.

EMC...continued from Page 1A

Director Larry Williams.

"We appreciate everybody being here tonight," said EMC Board President Mickey Cummings. "I'm really excited about this year and the things that are going on."

Cummings used his welcome as an opportunity to highlight the quality of workers employed by the EMC, noting some time he'd spent out in the field with an underground cable crew recently.

"The thing that I really want to emphasize to you is the importance of our employees and what they do for us," said Cummings. "Those guys and gals do a lot of hard work for us each and every day, and it makes our job exciting seeing what they're doing in the community."

Board Vice President Steven Phillips took to the microphone next to tell members about his work on the Policy Committee, but not before asking that the veterans in attendance stand and be recognized.

Briefly, Phillips touched on past policy changes, such as removing board access to costly insurance and the establishment of a conflict of interest policy.

More recent policy changes include updating how social media is used by EMC employees, how much money the EMC can donate before going before the board - now, anything over \$2,500 - and Phillips announced that the board is close to establishing a Code of Ethics.

Both Phillips and Board Attorney Larry Ford spoke on the creation of Operation Round Up, which is currently in the works.

Operation Round Up is a charitable giving program that residents will soon be able to opt in to, meaning that they will not be included in the program unless they specifically ask to be.

As the name suggests, the program works by rounding up to the next dollar the EMC bill of a person who has opted in to Operation Round Up.

For example, if a person's bill is \$150.49, and if that person has opted in to give to Operation Round Up, then their bill will be rounded up to \$151, and they will be donating 51 cents to the



GM Nelms holding the door for members outside North Georgia Tech, with EMC Director of Operations Colton Payne.

nonprofit.

Operation Round Up will be governed by a 501c3 nonprofit entity independent from the board of directors, and though it's still in its early stages, the board is soliciting feedback on where to implement the charitable donations.

Director Chris Logan gave some updates on the EMC's financials, including its debt, which is majority long-term for the 6,000 miles of BRMEMC powerlines and infrastructure.

Since 2015, the debt has gone from \$119,364,316 to \$116,721,577 year to date. That's nearly \$3 million in decreased debt in under two years, and Logan gave a lot of credit to the leadership of the EMC's new general manager, Jeremy Nelms.

One member asked about open board meetings, and the board said that it was working on a policy based on what other EMCs have done, including having members sign up if they wish to attend a board meeting.

As far as fiber-optic internet is concerned, Nelms reiterated the direction he's decided to take, aimed at taking advantage of the 1,100 miles of fiber that's already been installed.

According to Nelms, only about 30 percent of the homes that currently have access to fiber have signed up for the service, coming to about 6,000 homes in 20,000.

Instead of installing new fiber and going further into debt, Nelms said that he plans to work

on increasing marketing efforts to homes that currently have access but have yet to sign up, with a goal of upping the take rate beyond 30 percent.

Increasing the take rate will allow the EMC to generate more money to expand its fiber-optic capabilities in the future, according to Nelms.

When asked about personal use of EMC vehicles, Nelms answered that the company has trimmed that down to about six personnel with take-home vehicles.

He said that those employees, himself included, were expected to be able to respond to situations at a moment's notice, day or night, and therefore needed their company vehicles to be able to do so in the five-county region of the BRMEMC.

That evening, the board encouraged the membership to reach out at any time with questions or comments. Those looking to contact Nelms and the board can find contact information at brmemc.com.

"I'm just so proud to be here," said Nelms. "I've really learned to embrace the area. I've tried to meet as many members as possible, and sometimes when the members call me, that's when they're most frustrated, because they wouldn't call me otherwise."

"But I'm here for you all, because you all help to pay my salary, and I certainly do appreciate that and my family does too. And it's not lost on me."

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