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Safe Routes to School back to the drawing board

By Audra Anderson • Daily News

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The Safe Routes to School subcommittee will discuss cutting the scale of the project, like eliminating sidewalks on Beede Avenue and Douglas Avenue, or perhaps limiting the project to just Hall Avenue.

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The Safe Routes to School project, headed by the Breckenridge Active Living Committee, would cost the city around \$460,000 if they were to continue with the current plans for it, Director of Public Services Neil Crocker said.

The active living committee has received around \$281,000 in grant money for Safe Routes to School, primarily from a Minnesota Department of Transportation and West Central Initiative grant. The grant money was expected to cover a large portion of the previous cost estimate.

But a new estimate from Ulteig Engineers Inc, the engineering company contracted for the project, calculates the total cost will actually be approximately \$741,600, over \$300,000 more than the last estimate, Crocker said Wednesday, March 10 at the active living committee meeting.

“Unless there are alternatives brought forward that we can look at that would lessen the cost, we would end up having to take this plan to city council and let them know they would have to bond or the city would be responsible for that \$450-500,000 bill ... I don’t know how widely received this is going to be at the city council meeting,” Crocker said.

The project is part of a national initiative to create opportunities for students to walk or bike to school. Committee President Shawn Roberts said Safe Routes to School has been around longer than she’s been on the committee, but she has seen the city involved and supportive in every step of the way.

“You don’t go through 10 years of work to say, ‘OK, this isn’t something that’s going to be done,’” Roberts said.

In December 2020, the Breckenridge City Council approved the engineering proposal from Ulteig Engineering, but they had no notion at that time of how much the cost estimate from them would be, Crocker said.

When the city applied for the \$225,000 grant in January 2018, they needed a rough cost, city Administrator Renae Smith said.

Crocker and Joel Hoistad, former codes and building official for the city of Breckenridge, calculated a cost under the presumption they could keep the project management internal. They expected some contracting expenses for construction work, but they would oversee the engineering, he said.

They landed on \$421,961, Smith said.

The city received another grant for \$56,250, bringing the grant funds to \$281,250. After factoring in the grant money, the project was slated to cost the city around \$141,000 with Hoistad and Crocker at the helm.

The city then allocated \$100,000 from its capital outlay fund toward the project in 2018, bringing the projected cost down to around \$41,000.

“Well, then it came out that since these are state and federal dollars, it has to be engineered,” Crocker said.

At the time they were calculating a rough estimated cost, no one had “read the fine print” about needing to contract the engineering work, Crocker said.

The substantially higher cost is partially due to contracting with an outside agency and partially due to the changes to the original plan they made in October 2020 to accommodate Breckenridge citizens who live along the affected roads, Crocker said.

With the new numbers from Ulteig Engineers Inc, Crocker said he does not foresee the city council being in support of the project as is.

“If we want to continue to push this forward, it would be upon us to come up with alternatives to the proposed plan and look at cost savings,” Crocker said.

Crocker and Roberts decided further discussion and planning should be deferred to the subcommittee dedicated to the Safe Routes to School project. Crocker said they can discuss cutting the scale of the project, like eliminating sidewalks on Beede Avenue and Douglas Avenue, or perhaps limiting the project to just Hall Avenue.

“The main thing was getting access around the elementary and middle school, so people can get from the side streets onto that ... as well as a safe route between the two schools,” Roberts said.

The grant amount is locked in and will not decrease, Smith said. The city received the maximum amount of funding based on their rough cost estimate.

However, if the new plan deviates too far from the original intent and scope of the project, they could risk losing the whole grant, Crocker said. The grant money is also contingent upon the city finishing the project by 2022, but Crocker thinks the timeline is feasible since construction would only take a month or two.

In the coming weeks and months, the subcommittee will need to come up with a new, reduced plan, hand it over to Ulteig Engineers Inc, have them draft up a proposal, send it to the state to see if they accept it, and if they do, have it go through the city finance committee and city council for approval, Crocker said. A public hearing would also be necessary to make sure citizens are in support of the project.

He said if the citizens or council members are not in support of the project, they can either change the plans or move on to the next project.

“The last thing we want to do is railroad this through,” Crocker said.

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