Johnston Street to get makeover
Half-mile section of Lafayette roadway eyed in pilot project to clear clutter

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After more than a decade of talk about redesigning Johnston Street as a boulevard with sidewalks, landscaping and buried power lines, a pilot project is in the works for a half-mile stretch to show what the cluttered main thoroughfare might look like with a makeover.

The state Department of Transportation and Development and city-parish government are in the early stages of a project to reconstruct Johnston Street from Cajundome Boulevard to just west of the Horse Farm.

The plan calls for burying most of the power lines that stretch along and adding medians, sidewalks and bike paths, said City-Parish Public Works Director Kevin Blanchard.

There have been discussions of revamping Johnston Street since 2004, but there has been little movement, in part because of the anticipated cost.

Focusing on only a small section of the road allows planners to tiptoe into the undertaking and would provide an example for residents of what a retooled Johnston Street might look like, Blanchard said.

"Let's bite off things we can chew," he said.

Still uncertain is funding. The project is estimated at about $20 million to $25 million, but Blanchard said DOTD has committed to paying all but about $5 million, roughly the cost of burying power distribution lines along the half-mile section of Johnston Street.

Blanchard said the hope is the local share might come from a pot of $9 million in transportation funding the Lafayette area is in line to receive from DOTD, but the funding must be approved by the City-Parish Council and the Lafayette Metropolitan Planning Organization, an agency that oversees regional transportation projects.

The council is set to vote on the issue Tuesday.

DOTD's interest in the Johnston Street project is as a demonstration of how to implement the state's "complete streets" design standards, which call for roads to serve not only passenger vehicles but pedestrians, cyclists and public transportation, said DOTD spokeswoman Deidra Druilhet.

"The whole point of complete streets is to create an all-inclusive transportation network," she said. "We will see how this works out and look at the possibility of extending this further."

Burying the tangle of power lines along Johnston Street has been one of the more popular ideas in past discussions about redesigning the road, but the prospects of putting the utilities underground seemed dim after a 2012 study commissioned by Lafayette Utilities System estimated the cost would be from $16 million to $26 million for one mile.

LUS Director Terry Huval said his department took a second look at the estimate last year and found doing the small stretch between Cajundome Boulevard and the Horse Farm could be done for less, mainly because the area is not so congested.

"That's actually the easiest section to do, from our perspective," he said.

The plan is to bury only the power distribution lines, leaving in the place the larger, high-power transmission lines.

"The distribution lines are where the clutter is," Blanchard said.

He said the section of Johnston Street chosen for the pilot project is ideal because it runs past the Horse Farm, where a 100-acre central park is planned, and would tie in to a similar project on Bertrand Drive, where city-parish government plans to reduce portions of the four-lane road to two or three lanes and add sidewalks and street parking.

Both projects could serve as examples of "how can we retrofit some of the older parts of town," he said.

City-parish government already dabbled in such work before with a project completed last year with the University of Louisiana at Lafayette to redesign St. Mary Boulevard through campus, replacing two of the four vehicle lanes on St. Mary Boulevard and adding bike lanes.

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