

Borough streets project costs rise

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WAYNESBURG - Council reaffirmed its commitment to the troubled streetscape project Monday, even if the borough has to fork over an additional \$50,000 to pay for cost overruns.

"We have to finish the project," said Councilman Miles Davin. "At the same time though, we want (the contractors) to understand: We don't have an open checkbook."

Contractors encountered numerous costly problems since they began work on the Washington Street portion of the project in April. The budget for utility line relocation in particular has already been surpassed, and workers have not even started on High Street yet.

Burying the lines there, on a block from Cumberland to Morgan streets, will cost \$20,000 to \$40,000. So borough manager Bruce Wermlinger asked council if members would like to forego that part of the project to save some money.

About eight people who own businesses or property on that block came to the meeting Monday to urge council not to give them the short shrift.

Mary Beth Pastorius, who has been restoring two historic buildings on that block, said it wasn't fair that Washington Street, the so-called Gateway to Waynesburg University, seems to be getting all the resources even though that portion of the project was not part of the original plans.

"The university has benefited at the expense of these small property owners," she said. "If we don't get the utility line relocation, it's going to be a huge kick in the rear to those of us who have worked so hard and have invested so much."

Council members said they won't be doing the kicking. They passed a motion to continue the project as planned and to continue to pay the additional fees for construction and design that will result.

"Some way, I'll beg, borrow and steal to get this money. We want this project done and finished the way it is supposed to be done," said Mayor Blair Zimmerman.

Wermlinger said he is searching for corporate donors to reduce the impact on the borough budget, but he hasn't had any firm commitments so far.

The \$1.6 million streetscape project, which has been in the works since at least 2005, has been plagued with problems. Many of the headaches have concerned the utility lines. Last year, borough officials were able to negotiate with two of the three utility companies to keep the cost to bury the lines low. However, unexpected changes, in the form of re-digging a trench and installing a larger conduit, pushed the project over budget.

The borough has already spent about \$150,000 on the streetscape project. The utility line problems and additional bills for design consulting will push that figure closer to \$200,000.

"The whole project's been a nightmare. Nothing has hit the estimates. Nothing is working out easy," Wermlinger said.

The main contractor, SET Inc., is expected to finish work on Washington Street in about two weeks. The project will then move to High Street, where traffic will be restricted to one lane and parking will be prohibited.

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