

Shell seeks major Route 18, I-376 changes for proposed plant

By David Taube Calkins Media | Posted: Thursday, February 13, 2014 12:00 am

POTTER TWP. — Shell Oil Co. has developed detailed plans for major Interstate 376 and Route 18 changes in Beaver County, including relocating Route 18 south by 950 feet and adding lanes for a proposed ethane cracker plant.

The expanded Route 18, affecting 1.5 miles of roadway, could include as many as six lanes plus a turning lane during a peak construction phase, PennDOT District 11 administrator Dan Cessna said Tuesday.

The global oil and energy company has been considering whether to develop a petrochemical complex in Potter and Center townships, investing billions to create the facility. The company has not yet made final commitments, but a traffic study recently done said the plant could have construction begin in 2016 to 2017 and open in 2018.

“The engineering is very far along,” said Rebecca Matsco, supervisors chairwoman for Potter. “This is by not any means a preliminary sketch.”

A few weeks ago, Matsco visited a regional PennDOT headquarters for a presentation and saw a dramatic revamping of roadways near the Horsehead Corp. zinc plant.

Beaver County Commissioner Dennis Nichols, who also attended the PennDOT meeting, said Tuesday that construction efforts could begin this October.

“We’re very optimistic it is going to happen,” he said to approximately 115 attendees at a State of the County event organized by the Beaver County Chamber of Commerce in Hopewell Township.

The new plant could create about 800 jobs at the facility alone, according to a traffic study prepared for the company by Jacobs Engineering Group Inc., which has headquarters in Pasadena, Calif.

Under the plan, Route 18 would be relocated, allowing the company to create at least three parking areas between the current and future roadway, as well as an overflow parking area southwest of the new roadway, the traffic study proposed.

The changes would allow as many as 8,000 workers to move in and out of the development site within a three-hour shift change, the engineering firm said. The estimate was considered a worst-case scenario in terms of maximum traffic flow.

As many as 600 trucks per day could visit the site during peak construction, the engineering firm suggested. But afterward, that volume could drop to 120 trucks per day — the equivalent of 12 trucks per hour.

Shell media officials did not return a request for comment.

Route 18 serves as a major artery for traffic, especially for Shippingport commuters, but Potter officials are happy with the proposal, Matsco said.

“Moving the road actually consolidates our industrial areas together,” she said.

The township is also hopeful the new roadway would include bike lanes, allowing the community to connect with the Ohio River Trail in Monaca, Matsco said. Local officials are also seeking bus stops.

“We’re excited to be able to connect Potter Township to areas out there because (we’re) hoping to develop our own Raccoon Trail,” Matsco said.

Peak construction of the facility could go on for about five months, beginning in late 2017 or early 2018, and require police or certified traffic control contractors to direct traffic queues during peak periods at the height of production, the study said.

After constructing the ethane cracker, Route 18 would be reduced to four lanes plus a turning lane, Cessna said. The company would also remove an overflow parking area, among other changes.

Shell also wants to reshape I-376 interchanges, including adding a more direct on-ramp to I-376 eastbound from Route 18.

It was not immediately clear Tuesday when the Route 18 changes might begin.

The traffic changes have not received final approvals, and there are several moving parts because of changes to the interstate, requiring the involvement of the Federal Highway Administration and Southwestern Penn-sylvania Commission, a nonprofit governed by federal law for a Pittsburgh metropolitan area that consists of 10 counties, Cessna said.

The commission has not yet approved the changes, and several other environmental approvals are needed, Cessna said.

PennDOT will post a public notice about the project, and residents will be able to send comments about the proposed changes, Cessna said.

The project would be 100 percent funded by private sources, and no public money would be used for the design or building of roadway improvements, according to the plan and public officials.

Nichols said he thinks unless some major change occurs in the global market, the project will go forward.