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## State defends Utica Arterial plan

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**Observer-Dispatch**

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UTICA — The ranking local transportation official defended the proposed North-South Arterial Project at Wednesday's Common Council meeting — though a series of speakers afterward made clear they aren't convinced.

Michael Shamma, director of the state Department of Transportation Region 2, told council members and roughly 35 attendees that the controversial \$62 million proposal is the result of years of studies and constitutes the best possible plan given the money available.

"The solution we are proposing, we believe, is in the best interests of Utica and the residents of the city of Utica," Shamma said.

Critics have recently sought to slow down the proposal — for which the state is currently seeking final federal approval. Council and community members have instead advocated for a multi-way boulevard, which they believe will cost less, help neighborhoods and spur development.

Councilman James Zecca, D-2, has proposed legislation urging the state to halt the plan. That legislation was sent to a council committee Wednesday.

As currently proposed, the project includes replacement of the aging Columbia Street bridge with an interchange at Court Street and a series of other changes to nearby roads.

Shamma said the boulevard was studied and dismissed by professional planners not under state control, and said many of the current elements of the project are consistent with the boulevard concept.

He pointed out the need to replace the Columbia Street bridge and said if the project is delayed, some of the money set aside for it may be spent elsewhere.

"If we wait too long, we may get to a point where we have to close the bridge down while we wait for a solution," said Shamma, who agreed at the behest of council members to look at possible tweaks of the current project.

But Michael Bosak, head of the Landmarks Society of Greater Utica, spoke afterward and said he believes there is a better solution.

"I don't think the proposal as it sits follows smart growth procedures," said Bosak, who received applause.

In other council news:

• The Utica Municipal Housing Authority received support from the council to seek a half-million dollar state grant that would lead to a deconstruction program. Housing Authority Executive Director Taras Herbowy said the program has two aspects: a permit process to keep homeowners from taking fixtures and other features out of their homes, and a program to hire and train workers to assess the city's roughly 700 vacant structures and see what can be saved before a structure is demolished or shuttered from the elements.

The housing authority, which is working with the Genesis Group, expects to learn whether it received the grant by Jan. 1, 2012, and then present the full program to the council in February.

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