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Bids accepted for new I-12 interchange

It will use site of old rest area

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By Charlie Chapple

St. Tammany bureau

A Denham Springs construction company submitted the lowest bid Thursday to convert the closed Interstate 12 rest areas at the Tchefuncte River south of Covington into a new interchange for nearby Louisiana 21.

The \$9.7 million bid by Richard Price Contracting Co. LLC was the lowest of five bids and was taken under advisement by St. Tammany Parish officials for further review.

Parish engineer Joe Shoemaker said the project calls for essentially turning a "rest area that goes nowhere" along both sides of the interstate just west of the Tchefuncte River and one-half mile east of Louisiana 21 into another interchange for the state highway.

The interchange, he said, will be able to handle the expected traffic from development along both sides of the interstate, including the proposed one-million-square-foot Colonial Pinnacle Nord du Lac retail center along the northern side of the interstate.

The project is expected to take 11 months and be completed by this time next year. But roadways to connect the interchange into Louisiana 21 both north and south of the interstate will have to be built before it is useable.

Stirling Properties, which owns the Stirling Covington Center at Louisiana 21 south of the interstate, and the Wainer Brothers, which owns the site where Colonial Properties Trust plans to build the retail center, each are paying \$1.25 million toward construction of the interchange, with the parish paying the remainder of the costs.

Stirling Properties and Colonial Properties Trust also have committed to parish officials to pay for and build the connector roads from the interchange to Louisiana 21.

Colonial Properties is planning to build a \$10 million, six-lane boulevard from Louisiana 21 at Ochsner Boulevard through the retail center to the interchange, said Bruce Wainer of Wainer Brothers, a minor partner in the retail center.

The developers are aware of the time frame for the interchange project and hope to have the boulevard constructed at about the same time the interchange is completed, Wainer said.

"I'm very optimistic that the roads will be built -- if not at the same time -- very close to the same time as the interchange," Wainer said. He said Colonial Properties also plans to be constructing its retail center at the same time.

Along the south side of the interstate, James Maurin of Stirling Properties has said previously that the company plans to build a \$5 million connector, or service, road from the interchange to

Louisiana 21 at Brewster Road, just south of the Stirling Covington Center.

Maurin could not be reached for comment Thursday.

The rest areas stretch along both sides of the interstate for a half-mile from the western base of the Tchefuncte River bridges. They are linked by a U-shaped road that goes under the bridges, making the entire rest area accessible to both eastbound and westbound interstate traffic.

When the interchange and the connector roads are completed, the configuration means both east and westbound interstate traffic will have access to Louisiana 21 at the existing interchange, at Brewster Road via the service road to the south, or at Ochsner Boulevard via the boulevard through the retail center.

And motorists on Louisiana 21 will be able to access both westbound and eastbound lanes of the interstate at the existing interchange or at the new interchange via the connector roads.

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Charlie Chapple can be reached at cchapple@timespicayune.com or (985) 898-4828.