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Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/THOMAS METTHE

Abigail Ward, 5, is all eyes as a model train rolls past Saturday during the seventh annual Jacksonville Train Show held at the Jacksonville Community Center.

Historic group puts I-30 wishes in writing

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Little Rock's leading preservation organization has concluded that the \$631.7 million Interstate 30 corridor project would have a lesser impact on historical neighborhoods if it is built as an eight-lane thoroughfare through downtown Little

Rock and North Little Rock. The Quapaw Quarter Association also said it opposes any effort to widen Interstate 630 in the vicinity of downtown Little Rock. Traffic projections show that the I-30 corridor project, called 30 Crossing, would eventually require I-630 to be widened near the interchange it shares

with I-30.

But the eight-lane option wouldn't require I-630 to be widened as quickly as a 10-lane option would. The only other option is "no build."

I-630 cut through the heart of downtown Little Rock when it was built in

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Corridor

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the 1970s, disrupting longtime neighborhoods, sparking litigation and leaving a lasting bitterness that has reverberated through discussions about 30 Crossing.

Those were among the concerns that the organization outlined in a four-page letter dated Aug. 21 and addressed to the Federal Highway Administration, which must sign off on the project.

"The role that I-630's construction played in destroying vibrant 9th Street commerce, eliminating or devaluing key structures, physically dividing the community, mostly along racial lines, and dealing an almost fatal blow to the vibrancy of downtown Little rock is well-documented," the letter said. "Widening I-630 once again would have a devastating impact on historic neighborhoods along its route."

The organization would prefer that other options be pursued.

"If traffic flow needs to be eased, we urge Metroplan and its member city and county governments, the Department of Transportation and all interested parties to look at alternative traffic routes and creative urban planning to enhance, not further divide, the center of our city," the letter said.

But the organization sees the 30 Crossing project as inevitable and doesn't see any point in opposing it.

"The idea is we anticipate something is going to happen," Patricia Blick, the association's executive director, said in an interview. "We're just trying to be pro-active with our concerns."

The Arkansas Department of Transportation is intent on remaking the corridor, which

stretches 6.7 miles between Interstate 530 in Little Rock and Interstate 40 in North Little Rock.

The corridor also includes the I-30 bridge over the Arkansas River, which would be replaced. With an average daily traffic count of 123,000 vehicles, it is the busiest span in the state. The project also includes a section of I-40 between John F. Kennedy Boulevard and U.S. 67/167 in North Little Rock.

Other improvements that the department plans, include improving the interchanges, which will require adding two to four lanes to the six already in the corridor, depending on which of the two main alternatives is ultimately selected.

Blick's association has promoted preservation of the city's architectural heritage through advocacy, marketing and education for almost 50 years.

Its board and staff members have participated in at least four meetings with state highway officials and regional planners as part of a federally mandated assessment of the historical impact of the project, and the association expects to be a signatory on any "agreement documents" associated with the project.

If 30 Crossing is built, the organization said it anticipates no direct impact on historic structures, but "we do anticipate indirect impacts to historic properties if any alternative, other than no build, moves ahead," the letter said.

The indirect impact concerns quality of life, Blick said.

"Even if you don't destroy historical structures, if it's not desirable to be there, it doesn't help us, either," she said.

The association's board

is divided on the question of which interchange it would prefer in downtown Little Rock. The options are to remake the Cantrell Road interchange or to replace it with what is called a "split diamond interchange" that would use East Capitol Avenue, East Sixth and East Ninth streets to funnel traffic off and on I-30.

The board called the split diamond interchange's impact on the MacArthur Park Historic District and the old U.S. Arsenal in Little Rock, as its "greatest concern ... because increased traffic will be directed off the interstate and on to Capitol, 6th and 9th streets," according to the letter.

But that view was balanced by the safety concerns associated with an interchange at Cantrell Road, which still will funnel traffic into the pedestrian friendly River Market entertainment district.

"The QQA recognizes that the attempts to improve the current dangerous interchange feeding interstate traffic into the pedestrian heart of the River Market are complex, with no perfect answers," the letter said.

But if the split diamond interchange is adopted in the final design, the organization said it would oppose any efforts to remove street parking in the area of the interstate, notably on Capitol and on Sixth Street.

"As a preservation organization, we cannot advocate removing street parking so that exiting vehicles can rush through these historic and important neighborhoods, just as the River Market's dramatic revitalization, and the pedestrian culture that has accompanied it, moves south into these areas," the letter said.

