

ROADS

Underpass scheme faces additional 3-year delay

PRASIT TANGPRASERT

NAKHON RATCHASIMA: A long-delayed project to build an underpass in the city centre could go ahead within the next three years provided it passes an environmental impact assessment (EIA), according to the provincial office.

The underpass was designed in 2007 to alleviate traffic congestion where Highway 2 (Mittraphap Road) and Highway 224 intersect in tambon Nai Muang of Muang district.

However, the intersection is located within a kilometre of three historical sites; Ban Samrong Jan village, the landmark Thao Suranari Monument and the Chumpol Gate.

Given the close proximity of the historical sites, the law requires the owner of the project, which is the Highways Department, to commission an EIA study before construction can begin.

The law stipulates the project must keep any impacts on the environment and people's livelihoods to a minimum.

Yesterday, about 250 people attended a meeting to review methods of assessing the environmental impact. The meeting was attended by representatives from the provincial office, the Department of Highways, the

environmental office, the consultancy firm, the provincial chamber of commerce and local residents.

Pornchai Silarom, director of Provincial Highways Office 2, said the meeting, chaired by deputy provincial governor Saksit Sakunlikharetsima, was the first held to gauge public opinion on the project which could impact historical locations around it.

At the time of the project's design, the underpass was estimated to cost 300 million baht.

Now, the price tag is expected to be around 800 million baht. The cost could go up further if the project is redesigned and beautification elements added to reflect local culture.

If and when the EIA study is completed and approved, a budget will be sought from the government. But before that, the study results and public opinions on the project will be analysed, a process that could take up to a year.

Mr Pornchai said the project could get underway in 2023 at the earliest.

The 1.18-km underpass was designed for single-lane traffic going in both directions.

Each lane would be 3.25 metres wide. It will also have one-metre wide footpaths in both directions.