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Should I-290 drivers pay to extend Route 53?

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Route 53 ends at Lake-Cook Road, spilling traffic out onto local roads and creating traffic jams.

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By Marni Pyke

Who's going to pay to extend Route 53 into Lake County, and should the work require tolling existing freeways?

Those questions could derail a fragile consensus on the \$2 billion-plus Illinois tollway project and provoke a regional feud.



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Officials on the tollway's Illinois Route 53/120 Blue Ribbon Advisory Council went around in circles Tuesday trying to find common ground on plugging a massive shortfall in funding.

Lake County leaders opposed suggestions to create special taxing districts or raise the local gas tax to pay for the project in their jurisdiction.

"I don't think Lake County should be discriminated against," Buffalo Grove Mayor Jeff Braiman said.

But other options such as tolling the expressway section of Route 53 or a systemwide toll increase might go over like a lead balloon with some drivers



given that the tollway raised rates Jan. 1. Also controversial would be an idea floated Tuesday to consider tolling I-290 between I-90 and Army Trail Road.

Regarding tolls on Route 53, "that's not going to happen; you'll have a major war on your hands," said activist Rob Sherman, who spoke during public

comment. He lives on the Cook County side of Buffalo Grove.

Route 53 ends at Lake-Cook Road, spilling vehicles out onto local roads and creating traffic jams. County residents approved extending the highway to Route 120 in a 2009 referendum.

But significant environmental and flooding concerns about the expansion led the Illinois State Toll Highway Authority to establish the special council, which is supposed to vote on recommendations in May.

The group coalesced around three concepts that involve a four-lane tolled parkway on Route 53 to Route 120 with speeds of 45 mph. The Route 120 portion would extend east to the Tri-State Tollway and west to Route 12. But environmentally friendly aspects to the design make it more costly — ranging from \$1.9 billion to \$2.5 billion. Tolls alone won't pay for the building costs and debt, leaving a gap of between \$1.7 billion and \$2 billion.

Making Lake County businesses and taxpayers shoulder the burden is unfair and will drive away employers, Long Grove Mayor Maria Rodriguez said.

"(Lake County residents) will ask, 'Why should we be taxed if this is a tollway?'" Rodriguez said.

She and Braiman argued the parkway would benefit the entire region and the region as a whole should contribute either through tolls or possibly an infrastructure tax.

A special taxing district in just Lake County "would be devastating to local governments," Braiman said.

"I think your neighbors in Cook County might feel their taxes are a bigger problem," Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning Executive Director Randy Blankenhorn said.

Others argued that every option should be on the table.

"There have to be trade-offs," Illinois Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Doug Whitley said.

Another sticky issue is the cost of the new parkway — toll rates could be 20 cents a mile or higher if congestion pricing is used, which means motorists pay more for an express lane during rush hour. Other Illinois tollway rates are closer to 5 cents or 6 cents a mile.

Council member Howard Learner wondered how drivers would react to the discrepancy.

"Don't pretend people aren't going to see this as a really high toll," said Learner, who heads up the Environmental Law and Policy Center.