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# Report may pave way for new 'parkway' in Lake County

Council still grapples with environmental, cost concerns

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prompted calls for the roadway to be extended. (Nuccio DiNuzzo, Chicago Tribune / April 29, 2012)

Traffic congestion on northbound Route 53 at Lake Cook Road has

By Richard Wronski, Chicago Tribune reporter

May 7, 2012

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The question has bedeviled Lake County for decades: Is there a way to relieve chronic traffic congestion while minimizing sprawl and protecting some of the state's most pristine natural areas?

Until now, the answer has been no, but this month, it might change to a more hopeful maybe.

After months of spirited discussions, a blue-ribbon advisory council is expected to report on the prospect of extending Illinois Highway 53 north through central Lake County, where it would intersect with a new bypass of Illinois Highway 120.

Envisioned as a low-profile parkway - a "stealth highway," as one council member called it - the project would relieve congestion while promoting orderly development and ensuring environmental sensitivity.

Council leaders say they are closer than ever to reaching a regional consensus on the long-contentious issue. But the ambitious plan still faces two major roadblocks: lingering environmental concerns and a billion-dollar funding gap.

"My feeling is, this is the last, best chance to get this right," said George Ranney, longtime civic leader and co-chair of the council. "If we do it, we will have a wonderful example of a 21st-century highway design. ... And if we don't get it right, it shouldn't be built."

Specifically, the draft report calls for a 121/2-mile extension of Route 53 running north from Lake Cook Road and forming a "T" with a 14-mile corridor along east-west Highway 120 (Belvidere Road) near

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said. Here are some key questions. Why is the new highway needed? State and local officials have sought to extend Route 53 into Lake County since the 1960s, but opposition from some communities and environmentalists stymied the effort. Proponents cite an April 2009 advisory referendum as a breakthrough. About 76 percent of voters supported the proposition.

Meanwhile, as the county's population has grown, so has congestion. The Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning says the 53-120 project is needed to improve access and

environmental opposition remains, Lake County Board Chairman David Stolman said he is optimistic the council will approve the project. "A remarkable process is taking place," he

Grayslake.

Each would bypass Highway 120 and take different paths near two environmentally

Cost estimates for the project range from \$1.9 billion to \$2.5 billion, depending on the

Although questions remain about how the project will be paid for and significant

officials, planners, environmentalists and labor and business leaders — has developed three

The 25-member council which comprises public

## where the existing highway ends at Lake Cook Road. About 100,000 vehicles a day pass through the intersection.

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alignment.

possible alignments for the east-west stretch.

sensitive areas, Squaw Creek Complex and Almond Marsh.

How would the highway look?

mobility not just in Lake County but in the entire region.

Plans call for the parkway to be four lanes wide to minimize its footprint. Much of it would be built below grade level, with landscaped earthen berms 5 to 7 feet high on either side.

The draft report notes that extending Route 53 north would ease a notorious bottleneck

- "The purpose is to make sure it doesn't overshadow the communities," Stolman said.
- "People don't want to see a big monstrosity of an expressway."
- Stolman, the council's co-chairman, called the project a "stealth highway."
- plan for a "21st-century urban highway." "There is consensus that this should not look like a regular interstate highway," said Randy

The report recommends a boulevard-type parkway in keeping with the planning agency's

- Blankenhorn, the agency's executive director and council member. "It should fit into the context of the county. It should not look like the Tri-State."
- The lanes of at least one section of the Highway 120 portion would be widely separated to
- protect natural areas. The corridor would include a trail for bikes and pedestrians, connect with existing trails and
- accommodate bus transit.

# How would the project be paid for?

the report says.

- Since little or no state funding would be available, the project would be built as a tollway,
- But the parkway wouldn't pay for itself. Charging tolls for cars and trucks at current rates over the next 15 years would produce only \$40 million to \$105 million, depending on which alignment is chosen.
- That leaves a hefty shortfall as much as \$2 billion. Plans call for tolls to be "congestion-priced," that is, the cost would depend on the level of

Tollway system, and not looked at as strictly a "Lake County highway."

- traffic the more traffic, the higher the toll. Tolls also would be indexed to rise with inflation.
- In a proposal sure to spark controversy, tolls would be levied on Route 53 from Lake Cook Road south to the **Jane Addams** Tollway (Interstate Highway 90).
- Stolman said he believes that the project should be funded as a part of the entire Illinois

The Reagan Tollway (I-88) "doesn't pay for itself. I-355 doesn't pay for itself," he said. "The people of Lake County shouldn't be put into a penalty box."

The report proposes several options that could raise local revenue, including creation of special taxing districts along the corridor. The rationale is that nearby property will rise in value as it benefits from construction of the new highway.

Other options include raising Lake County's sales tax and imposing a county gas tax.

#### What are environmental concerns?

The panel recommends a "comprehensive planning approach" to reduce long-term and irreversible impacts to the environment.

The proposed highway would run near or through four prime wetlands: Long Grove Surry Marsh, Indian Creek Marsh, Almond Marsh and the Squaw Creek Complex.

To protect the wetlands, some sections would be built on pylons as an elevated, open causeway.

A stormwater management system would filter runoff. Instead of running into storm sewers, the water would be directed into swales planted with native prairie and wetland vegetation.

To control light pollution, the highway would have overhead lighting only at interchanges.

Alternatives to road salt, such as a sugar beet-derived formula, would prevent damage to the surrounding ecosystems.

Although environmentalists participated in the discussions, not all their concerns have been allayed.

Steve Barg, executive director Conserve Lake County, formerly known as the Liberty Prairie Conservancy, and other opponents say the highway should not run through Almond Marsh, home to a heron rookery.

"This (rookery) has statewide conservation significance," Barg said. "It's the herons versus the road."

The Sierra Club and five other organizations contend that the proposed highway would "destroy irreplaceable natural resources (and) contribute to new development, congestion problems and pollution."

## What happens next?

Since the draft report is still being refined, its final recommendations could change somewhat, according to the chairmen.

It is scheduled to be completed later this month, after additional comments are included from council participants and the public.

The draft is available at http://www.illinoistollway.com.

The council is scheduled to hold a final meeting on the document May 18. The report will be sent to the Illinois Tollway board for consideration.

What happens then hasn't been determined, tollway Executive Director Kristi Lafleur said.

The key question for tollway directors is deciding whether to take on the project - and at what cost.

The agency has launched a massive 15-year construction program, paid for with the neardoubling of tolls Jan. 1. The work includes building a new bypass aroundO'Hare International Airportand expanding the existing Elgin-O'Hare Expressway, which would become a tollway.

The agency will pay most of the \$3.4 billion cost, but about \$300 million remains unfunded and is expected to come from local communities, mainly in DuPage County.

The tollway's capital program includes money for planning a 53/120 project, but no construction funds.

Asked last week if that could change, Lafleur said only that the tollway's \$12.1 billion

program has some funding "flexibility." "If something emerges, there may be some opportunity to support additional projects over

that 15-year period," she said.