

Editorial: The Illinois Tollway stops squandering millions on Route 53

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By The Editorial Board



Route 53 ends its run as a divided highway at the Lake County border. (Ronnie Wachter/for the Pioneer Press)

Government sometimes spends tons of public money on studying and planning something but not building it ... then spends more money on more planning and studying. When it's an idea that no one was really that enamored with, and that never gets built, you can't blame citizens for grabbing their pitchforks.

Case in point: The long, tired saga of the proposed Route 53 extension into Lake County. The notion of an expressway that would extend Route 53 into Lake reaches all the way back to the 1960s. The 25-mile extension would connect Arlington Heights in Cook County to Grayslake in Lake County, and widen a segment of Route 120.

If it ever got built, the project would cost a whopping \$2.65 billion. But there's never been a lot of love for this idea. Last October, the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, the entity that lays out which transportation projects get whatever federal funding is available

for the region, took the Route 53 extension off its priority list. Earlier, in 2017, the U.S. Public Interest Research Group, a consumer advocacy organization, had included the project on its list of the country's most wasteful roadway boondoggles.

Yet the Illinois Tollway had been pushing forward with a \$25 million environmental study it had launched in 2017 to help determine whether the proposed toll road was needed to accommodate growth in northern Cook, Lake and eastern McHenry counties. The Tollway has spent \$13 million of that initial \$25 million. It planned to spend an additional \$25 million to complete the multiyear study.

All for an idea that appeared to be on a road to nowhere.

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In December we editorialized against [squandering more money](#) on, yes, more planning and studying of an idea that's been gathering dust for a half-century.

We proposed that Tollway officials could reach a simple conclusion: *If CMAP is downgrading this idea, we're finished spending money on it.*

On Friday, [Illinois Tollway officials wisely decided to](#) halt any further efforts toward the Route 53 extension. Yes, \$13 million has already been spent on this study. But another \$37 million hasn't — and can be put to better use.

In a letter to Tollway board members, their executive director, Jose Alvarez, wrote that by 2016, "the project had lost significant local support, including (from) the Lake County Board itself.

"At this time, the Illinois Tollway is not in a position to lead the development of a project that lacks both local consensus and clear financial viability," Alvarez wrote.

Well said. If the people who would supposedly benefit from a major infrastructure project don't see the need for it, why build it? Why study building it?

What happens now? Later Friday, the village of Hawthorn Woods, long an opponent of the Route 53 extension, reiterated a longstanding proposal to transform the route corridor into a 1,000-plus-acre stretch of open space, natural habitat and wetlands for public recreational use and environmental stewardship.

Several local governments in the past have expressed interest in protecting this property. We haven't studied the proposal enough to know if it's as smart as it sounds. But this is the kind of constructive conversation Lake County can have, now that the Illinois Tollway has faced reality.

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