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How much would you pay in tolls on Route 53 extension? Tollway wants to know

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Northbound Route 53 traffic will have somewhere to go if the Illinois tollway extends the road into Lake County.

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By Marni Pyke

The Illinois tollway will spend \$4 million to fine-tune plans for a Route 53 extension into Lake County, survey drivers and address a funding gap of up to \$2.3 billion.

The agency has not officially taken the project under its wing — and isn't likely to vote on that issue until later in 2014.

A D V E R T

But in the meantime, Illinois State Toll Highway Authority consultants will try to address pressing questions such as the budget shortfall, how much the environmentally sensitive road will cost to maintain and what tolls should be set at. Planners have been operating under a 20-cents a mile assumption for the parkway, which will cost from \$2.3 to \$2.7 billion to build.

Tollway directors conditionally approved hiring Schaumburg-based TranSystems Corp. for \$4 million at a Wednesday committee meeting to answer those questions within 18 months.

Route 53 proposals

The project envisions a four-lane, 45 mph parkway that's sunken below grade in places to accommodate forest preserves and marshes along the route, which

stretches from Lake-Cook Road to Route 120. A Route 120 component would extend east to the Tri-State tollway and west to Route 12.

The tollway also intends to survey potential users. It's important to see what the public would pay given the unique costs of the parkway and the 45 mph speed limit, Director and Aurora Mayor Tom Weisner said.

"We don't want to create a road that cannot be sustained or launch a project that doesn't work," tollway Chairman Paula Woolf said.

There are north-south arterial roads in Lake County that parallel the proposed parkway but they're often congested, Deputy Chief of Engineering for Planning Rocco Zucchero said.

"It's about the value of time. (For example) would you be willing to spend X amount to save 10 minutes?"

Lowering the road allows for a design that reduces noise, salt spray and water runoff that could harm wildlife and endangered plants in nearby wetlands and preserves.

But officials acknowledged that creating a bio-friendly parkway not only drives up the cost, it's something that toll authorities traditionally don't do. "There's a lot of uncharted territory," Zucchero said.

The new road would be about 12 miles on the Route 53 portion and 14 miles on the Route 120 segment. Interchanges are planned for Route 12, the Tri-State, Peterson Road, Midlothian Road, Route 22 and Lake-Cook Road.

The interchanges are expected to spark commercial development along the corridor but planners don't want municipalities at war over recruiting big-box stores and strip malls. Instead, the Chicago Metropolitan Area for Planning will conduct a land-use study of the corridor with the goal of getting every affected municipality and Lake County to sign on.

About \$976 million could be raised from charging higher tolls during rush hour, raising local gas or sales taxes, creating special taxing districts, or instituting tolls on the existing portion of Route 53 between Lake-Cook Road and the Jane Addams Tollway (I-90). That idea, however, has raised the hackles of several northwest Cook County mayors.