

Lake County | updated: 10/27/2014 9:36 AM

A last chance to end 50-year Rt. 53 extension struggle

Hope grows for an end to the fight between traffic and the environment in Lake County



Some of the Route 53 extension right of way goes along Route 83 just south of Hawley Street near Mundelein.

Paul Valade | Staff Photographer



Mick Zawislak

First of a two-part series

Cryptic roadside signs atop rusting yellow poles throughout central Lake County for decades have marked more than the potential route of a new highway.

The "FAP 342 ROW" signs are reminders of conflict over the proposed extension of Route 53 north 12.5 miles from Lake-Cook Road in Long Grove -- an emotional battle between those who fear its effect on natural areas and those who embrace it as a way to improve transportation and grow the economy.

Traffic congestion has worsened significantly during the half century since the notion of a major route into central Lake County first surfaced. Suburbs grew without the ability of existing roads to keep up.

Advocates say an extended Route 53 and improved Route 120 would carry a maximum traffic volume of 62,000 vehicles per day by 2040 -- about the same as now travel on I-94 north of Great America. A trip from Grayslake to Schaumburg would take 68 minutes with the road, compared to 98 minutes without it, according to estimates.

On the other side of the coin is Lake County's strong sense of environmental stewardship. The natural areas are what attract many of those who call it home.

A Route 53 advisory panel (<http://www.illinoistollway.com/construction-and-planning/community-outreach/illinois-route-53-120-project>) in 2012 noted Lake County has the greatest number of unique and threatened natural resources, including lakes, wetlands and native prairie remnants, of any county in Illinois. Historically, that has been a rallying point for environmentalists and conservation groups.

But a make-or-break decision is in the works with a new proposal that hinges on balancing the interests of environmental protection, transportation access and economic development.

"This is our last best chance. We've gotten further with this project than any of the other efforts," said Lake County Board Chairman Aaron Lawlor, co-chairman of the Route 53/120 Project Blue Ribbon Advisory Council.

After generations of often bitter debate, such cautious optimism is due, in part, to a more transparent and inclusive planning approach than in the past. It has led to recommendations that include a host of road design innovations and other measures to protect the environment.

Support comes from a new alliance that has engaged traditional opponents in the planning. Their support, though, hinges entirely on whether long-sought protections

for natural areas are financed and followed.

A troubled path

The proposed path of the Route 53 extension passes by - and through - developments that have built up over the many years the route has been considered.

This interactive tour starts at the south end of the proposed extension, where Route 53 ends at Lake-Cook Road, and moves north to where it forks near Route 120.

Along the way, key spots as well as fragile wetlands that may be affected by the new tollroad have been highlighted. [Click here to start the tour](#)

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Construction of the one-of-a-kind toll road would forever change the landscape of central Lake County as it crosses sensitive environmental areas and likely leads to development of thousands of new homes and millions of square feet of businesses.

It would mean families along Harrison Avenue in Mundelein's Cambridge Country subdivision -- and other neighborhoods along the road corridor -- could see their view of open spaces beyond backyard fences disappear.

"It's quiet. That's why we like it," said Virginia Biegel, whose family of five moved to Cambridge Country nearly two years ago. She said it's hard to envision the road, and she isn't sure if her family would move if it is approved.

Others potentially could lose more than a view.

"It goes straight through the house," said Helga Ziegler, who with her husband, Josef, built a home in 1973. They operate an apple orchard on 16 acres between Bacon and Cedar Lake roads south of Route 120 near Grayslake. "We had people who wanted to buy it, but when they find out ... " Josef added.

Many hurdles remain before officials will know if this project has a future. Specifics, such as how and precisely where it will be built, will begin to emerge only if the Illinois State Toll Highway Authority board decides, possibly next year, to proceed with a more detailed study for a 4-lane, limited-access, 45 mph parkway.

There are plenty of challenges: how to pay the \$2.35 billion to \$2.65 billion tab, whether environmental protections are to be followed, and how to control the expected ripple effect of development.

Will the groups studying financing and land uses find acceptable answers? That depends on whether all parties are satisfied the end result is fair and sustainable.

Recommendations for financing are expected to be ready for the tollway board to consider early next year and for land uses possibly by late 2015.

Tollway leaders say they are committed to advancing the project but warn it must be in line with principles created for the rest of the tollway system: shared local cost, consensus and political support.

"We have no interest in building a road people don't want," said Paula Wolff, chairwoman of the tollway board.

Funding

The project is envisioned with a smaller footprint than traditional highways to minimize environmental effects. It would extend north 12.5 miles from Lake-Cook Road in Long Grove to south of Route 120 in Grayslake, where it would split east and west. The split would bypass Route 120 from east of Route 45 to west of Route 134 or west of Fairfield Road. This top of the "T" would stretch 12 miles from near Route 12 in Volo to I-94 in Waukegan.

A 300-foot-wide corridor was defined long ago, and the Illinois Department of Transportation has acquired about two-thirds of the needed right of way. IDOT made its last land purchase in 2011, acquiring 886 acres for \$48.3 million.

While the exact configuration is not final, swaths of vacant land splitting subdivisions are evident at various points along the route.

The immediate need is for funding because tolls on the new road won't be enough. There is an estimated gap as large as \$2.4 billion that must be closed by other sources.

Suggestions include a 4-cent-per-gallon Lake County gas tax to be split between the project and other local transportation needs, and a large special financing district. Both would require state legislation to establish. New or higher tolls on I-94 in Lake County, and congestion pricing and annual toll increases as a potential test program for the entire tollway system are being considered.

Cash-strapped Illinois is expected to be asked to make a big contribution, such as land already acquired.

The special financing district would encompass property within a mile of the road and two miles from intersections. Taxing bodies, such as school districts, would get 75 percent of property taxes from any new nonresidential development. The working group that studied the option suggests the other 25 percent be used for a long-term environmental stewardship fund to help mitigate possible effects of the extension.

"We felt this was a very politically acceptable approach to go with this. We know that with the road, there will be a significant amount of commercial and industrial development," said Mundelein Mayor Steve Lentz, who headed the group.

The local contribution has to be significant enough -- perhaps up to 20 percent of the overall cost -- for the project to move forward.

Cost-sharing has become standard for big tollway projects, beginning with the I-355 extension in DuPage County, and most recently the \$3.4 billion Elgin-O'Hare western access spanning Elmhurst, Bensenville and other communities in DuPage and Cook counties that included a \$300 million local commitment.

Participants say Route 53/120 could become a national model of how major road projects are selected and built. As such, this effort has a different feel compared to previous attempts because local officials are shaping the project and providing suggestions for funding.

Long Grove, which used to budget funds annually to fight Route 53, is among the longtime opponents now participating in the project.

"If the road is going to go through, let's not put blinders on (but) make sure the

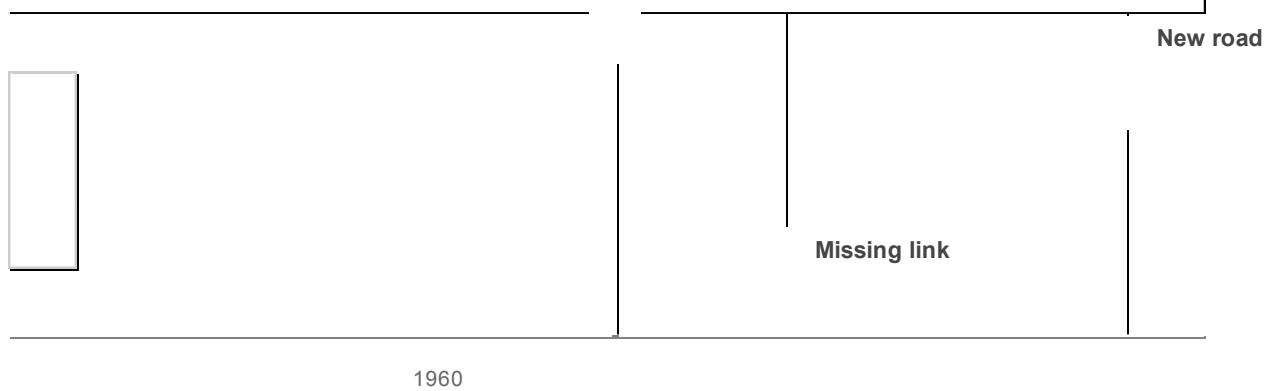
concerns are heard and taken seriously," Village President Angie Underwood said.

Environmental woes

Lake County is considered especially vulnerable to disruptions from a new road, so environmental interests are demanding costly features intended to make it fit the landscape and protect natural resources.

The long road

A proposed extension to Route 53 has been in the works for decades.



The guide for the ongoing research and discussion is a 109-page report crafted by a diverse volunteer panel of community leaders, environmentalists, planners and others appointed by the tollway authority. In May 2012, after nine months of study, the advisory council recommended pursuit of the roadway.

So far, that alliance has held. How environmental requirements are funded and how

closely they are followed are among the challenges to continued agreement.

"I would say it's still fragile. They (environmentalists) are still watching closely," said George Ranney, co-chairman of the advisory panel. "They're waiting for the first shoe to drop to see if the recommendations aren't followed."

Hawthorn Woods Village President Joe Mancino said village officials see the potential traffic and economic benefits but are wary of to-be-determined specifics of design and alignment through his town.

"If it is done exactly like that (advisory) committee envisions it, the environmental stakeholders will go along," Mancino said.

Design innovations, such as building portions of the road below grade to block noise or elevated sections through wetlands, are meant to protect those areas.

The total cost of all innovations -- beyond those of tollway policy or state and federal requirements -- stands at \$325 million to \$400 million.

Some \$81 million of that is the environmental stewardship fund, a nonnegotiable part of the recommendation, officials say. It would protect and enhance the natural resources within 2 miles of the roadway, protect and restore at least 750 acres beyond, deal with any unintended consequences and provide oversight for 50 years. Specifics have yet to be determined.

"They're not going to throw pavement through the middle of a wetland and call it a day," Lake County Administrator Barry Burton said.

Spur development?

It's clear that construction of a Route 53/120 extension would trigger big changes by stimulating and unlocking business and residential development. If not coordinated, traffic on existing roads would increase dramatically and damage ecological areas, say those involved in the process.

Skeptics contend new commuters and shoppers will flood local roads and spoil the area's character.

"The small traffic relief expected will then be erased as tens of thousands of new commuters and shoppers crowd into Lake County's open space, clogging local roads that access the new tollway and spoiling the rural character we all love," said Evan Craig, chairman of the Sierra Club Wood and Wetlands Group.

Because a new road alone won't solve traffic congestion, the panel called for a land use plan and strategy for the corridor. The study area extends 2 miles from the road, or about a quarter of the size of Lake County. It is proceeding separately but in tandem with the groups studying financing.

The purpose is to work with corridor communities to plan in a way that blends land uses, transportation, economic development and open space, said Jason Navota, principal with the [Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning](http://www.lakecorridorplan.org/) (<http://www.lakecorridorplan.org/>), which is coordinating that aspect.

Part of the work will be to identify areas likely to undergo significant change because of development, and important natural areas that merit special attention. The objective is to outline a broad land use strategy and specific plans for about a dozen areas expected to change because of the road.

Participants in the land use study say that for the traffic and economic benefits to last, communities must change their approach to development. If not, the problems the 53/120 project aims to solve could resurface.

How or if that can be accomplished remains to be seen. Plans of the corridor communities collectively are out of scale with the road design and call for much more development than is feasible, said Lawlor, co-chairman of the land use committee. If the corridor is developed based on municipal plans, 6,868 acres of agricultural land and 9,160 acres of open space would be lost, preliminary data show.

Communities farther from the road will want to protect their investments; those closer will want to parlay the advantage. Still, the land can only hold so much.

"We want this road to be successful so if we allow unrestricted development along the corridor and dump all those cars (onto adjoining roads), 53 won't be successful," Lawlor said.