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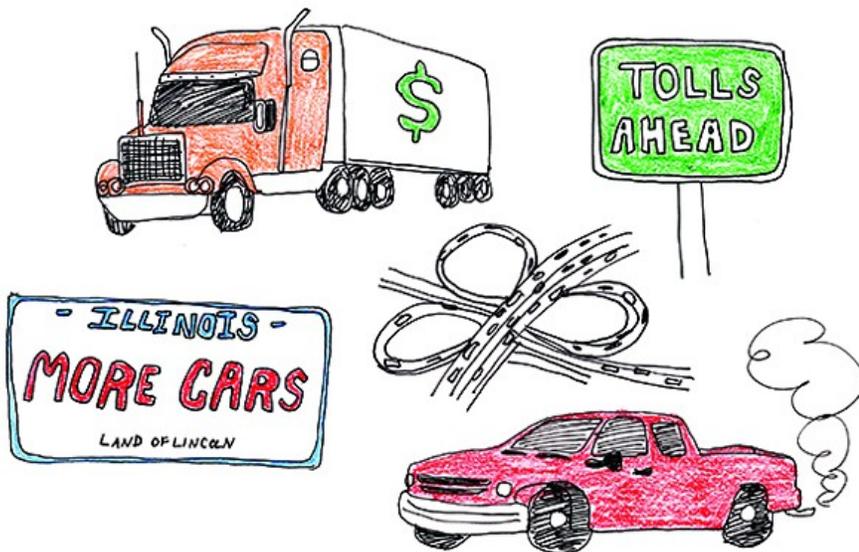
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# Will Rauner's plan to widen the Stevenson ease congestion—or encourage more driving?

Transit advocates are divided on the issue.

By John Greenfield [@greenfieldjohn](#)



RACHAL DUGGAN

or all his warts, Governor Bruce Rauner deserves credit for putting the brakes on the Illiana Tollway, a pet project of his predecessor Pat Quinn. That \$1.3 billion highway boondoggle, proposed for a corridor roughly ten miles south of the metro region, would have been funded by a public-private partnership (P3) that would have put Illinois taxpayers on the hook for some \$500 million in borrowing.

In comparison, Rauner's announcement earlier this month that he wants to use P3 funding to build new toll lanes on the Stevenson Expressway, aka I-55, sounded downright fiscally responsible. The state estimates it would cost \$425 million to build the new lanes, less than a third of the price of the Illiana. Work on the lanes could start as early as 2017, with completion by 2019.

The Metropolitan Planning Council, a local transportation and

development think tank that opposed the Illiana, has applauded this project as sound urban planning.

But MPC's close ally the Active Transportation Alliance, which advocates for better conditions for walking, biking, and transit, has come out strongly against Rauner's plan, arguing that the solution to regional traffic woes is to give people alternatives to driving alone, not add road capacity.

The Stevenson project would cover the 25-mile stretch between the Veterans Memorial Tollway (I-355) and the Dan Ryan Expressway (I-90/94). The state says this segment of I-55 carries roughly 170,000 vehicles a day and is plagued by long, unreliable travel times.

At least one "managed lane" would be added to the Stevenson in each direction. A likely scenario would allow solo drivers to pay a toll to bypass traffic jams on the regular lanes. Pace buses and carpoolers could use the new lanes at no additional charge.

The project's price tag would be relatively modest thanks to the Stevenson's existing wide paved shoulders, which are used for Pace's successful bus-on-shoulder program. Converting the shoulders to lanes that can handle more vehicles and higher speeds would require little or no land acquisition.



A Pace bus driving on the shoulder of the Stevenson.

PACE

The new lanes would employ "congestion pricing" to ensure that traffic flows smoothly—the fee would go up or down according to demand, based on the number of vehicles in the regular and express lanes. As the expressway becomes more crowded, higher tolls would reduce the number of drivers entering the express lanes.

In 2010 MPC conducted a study for the state tollway authority that looked at the possible effects of building managed lanes on I-55. The report predicted drivers who pay the toll would shave 22 minutes off a morning rush-hour commute on the 25-mile stretch.

Assuming the toll prices are well calibrated to reflect demand, drivers who pay would be rewarded with faster, jam-free trips. That makes it more likely that an investor could be paid back via toll revenue than would have been the case with the half-baked Illiana.

In a blog post last week, MPC vice president Peter Skosey cheered Rauner's proposal. Skosey noted that adding capacity to I-55 is a top priority in the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning's Go to 2040 regional plan.

He also applauded the inclusion of congestion pricing, noting that

expanding the roadway without it would cause new lanes to fill up with traffic.

But Active Trans's leadership thinks adding new automobile lanes to the Stevenson, even managed ones, would just make the region more car-dependent.

## "ADDING HIGHWAY CAPACITY TO FIGHT CONGESTION IS LIKE LOOSENING ONE'S BELT TO FIGHT OBESITY."

—RON BURKE, DIRECTOR OF THE ACTIVE TRANSPORTATION ALLIANCE

In a post last week, director Ron Burke argued the state should instead convert existing roadway to carpool lanes and bus lanes, improve Metra service, and use transportation demand management strategies to give travelers options besides driving solo.

"New highway capacity in urban areas like ours leads to more driving, more congestion, and development patterns over time that are often not conducive to walking, biking and transit," Burke wrote.

He also predicted that the additional car lanes would lead to more traffic jams on the surface roads leading to and from the Stevenson.

When I asked the Illinois Department of Transportation to respond to Burke's arguments, spokeswoman Gianna Urgo provided a one-sentence statement: "IDOT is committed to exploring all possible solutions that reduce congestion, enhance safety and improve travel times."



Ron Burke  
JOHN GREENFIELD

Skosey says he doesn't have a problem with the position taken by Active Trans. "Their mission is to promote alternative forms of transportation, so I think they're being consistent with their mission," he said.

"But you can't move everything by transit and bicycles," he added. "Things have to move by cars and trucks as well."

Skosey conceded that, even if tolled lanes are built, the free lanes would likely remain as congested as they are today. He also

acknowledged that MPC's 2010 study didn't consider the impact on the surrounding roads. "We have not done any analysis that disproves Active Trans's statement on this," he said.

Burke harbors no grudge against MPC for its stance in favor of the highway expansion.

"What it boils down to is whether one wants to concede that it's inevitable the Stevenson would be expanded," he said. "There's an old saying: Adding highway capacity to fight congestion is like loosening one's belt to fight obesity."

Burke argued that it would be much cheaper to eliminate 5 percent of the car trips on the Stevenson than build 5 percent more capacity.



Pete Skosey  
MPC

For example, Burke noted that many metropolitan areas around the country have multiple "transportation management associations," nonprofits that help workers access large employment centers that aren't directly accessible by transit. However, the Chicago region has just one: the TMA of Lake Cook. It manages the popular Shuttle Bug program, providing Pace bus service between Metra stations and job centers in northern Cook County and Lake County.

Other TMA strategies include on-demand rides for employees working late, encouraging employers to let workers telecommute, discounted transit passes, and carpool and bike commuting encouragement.

"We could certainly be eliminating some demand on the Stevenson through those strategies," Burke said. "The bottom line is, one person and a briefcase in a car is an amazingly wasteful use of public space and a very effective way to create traffic jams." ❏

John Greenfield edits the transportation news website Streetsblog Chicago.

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