

Both sides of Route 53 extension debate seek direction



Supporters and opponents of the long-debated Route 53 extension are looking for answers after a Lake County official pulled back support. (Simon Brubaker / Pioneer Press)

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At the first meeting since one of the biggest supporters of their major Lake County road project pulled back, Illinois Tollway Authority board members didn't comment about the turn of events related to the proposed Route 53 extension.

The silence is not what proponents and detractors of the long-debated road project wanted to hear, as some on both sides of the issue have said they're now wanting direction from the Illinois Tollway on the future of the project after Lake County Board Chairman Aaron Lawlor announced in May he could no longer support the extension idea.

Others have said they want Lake County officials to suggest alternatives if the extension doesn't happen.

The Illinois Tollway board put nothing about the possible Route 53 extension into Lake County on its May 26 meeting agenda, but members did listen to about an hour of comments from individuals who supported and

opposed the issue. Later in the meeting, Board Chairman Bob Schillerstrom said the board would discuss its course on the road project "in the near future" and then thanked the numerous speakers.

"The board values the input," Schillerstrom said.

For decades, Route 53 has helped move traffic from Interstate 90 to Lake Cook Road. The proposed project would extend the highway up to Route 120 in Grayslake, which runs east-west across the county.

In December, the Tollway board [gave the go-ahead](#) for a multimillion dollar environmental study on the proposed extension. The Tollway has budgeted \$5.8 million this year toward the estimated \$40 to \$50 million environmental impact study.

In recent years, a group called the Blue Ribbon Advisory Council also was created to brainstorm ideas on how the highway would be built and funded. The BRAC group, made of developers, environmental groups and government officials, first came up with a plan that called for constructing an 12-mile extension of Route 53 and the widening of about 12 miles of Route 120, estimated at roughly \$2.6 billion in 2020 dollars, tollway records show.

Now after Lawlor pulled back support, several people involved in the project have been using the moment to reiterate their side of the issue, with some looking to the Tollway and Lake County officials for direction.

Openlands, a Chicago non-profit that works to preserve green spaces in northeastern Illinois and served as a BRAC charter member, initially supported the Route 53 design before pulling back its own support. Openlands attorney Stacy Meyers said her organization welcomes Lawlor's decision and felt let down by the direction the Tollway has taken on the project.

"It's valuable that he recognizes that we're not going the right way anymore," Meyers said. "It's important when we see something derailed to stop and think about where we should go now."

She said Openlands' decision to reverse support for the project happened after the Tollway strayed away from what BRAC advised.

"It fell apart," Meyers said. "They weren't willing to bind themselves. It really would have been a groundbreaking way of doing planning."

Inside Buffalo Grove Village Hall, officials have an opposing view. The village has long favored the highway extension, seeing it as a relief from the traffic that spills from the final exit ramp onto the stretch of Lake Cook Road in Buffalo Grove.

Village President Beverly Sussman said the village board is preparing a push to finish the project.

"We're not changing our mind because Aaron Lawlor changed his mind," Sussman said. "It's a very important part of our comprehensive plan."

BRAC came to life when the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning —an agency that determines how governmental transportation dollars are spent in the Chicago area — made the Route 53 extension a top priority.

In an email, CMAP Executive Director Joe Szabo said the agency stands by its support.

"Lake County and the region need and deserve enhanced mobility, while also ensuring preservation of the county's rich environmental assets," Szabo said.

But he said the Tollway also must adhere to recommendations the BRAC group made. Szabo also is among those waiting to see another move from Lake County officials.

"CMAP looks forward to learning more about Lake County's new vision," Szabo said.

On May 16, the Tollway board lost the support of Lawlor, who once advocated for the project. In a written statement, Lawlor wrote the Route 53 design [posed too many threats](#) to the environment to endorse.

After the Tollway board meeting May 26, Lawlor told Pioneer Press that "a series of conversations" he had over the last couple months ultimately convinced him to pull back support on the project.

"I have concerns that are very grave concerns," he said, adding how construction expenses would erode environmental protections. "This would ultimately become a cost-cutting exercise, and that is the first, logical place that anyone would cut."

At the board meeting, people on both sides of the idea wanted to know from the Tollway the next steps for the project.

"This is a fiscal and political impossibility," said Barbara Klipp, co-chair of Livable Lake County, an environmental coalition that has opposed the extension. "We ask you to stop wasting further money. We feel that we're being held hostage by this project for decades."

Despite the challenges, Bonnie Thomson Carter, a Lake County Board member in District 5, which stretches from Lakemoor to Fox Lake, said the region needs the Route 53 extension.

"I know what a challenge this project is, and that is the reason why it hasn't been built in the 50-plus years it has been contemplated," Thomson Carter said. "Our region needs this project."

[Sidney Mathias](#), who Lawlor appointed as a Lake County board member for District 20, which covers Buffalo Grove, Long Grove and Prairie View, said he would welcome a second change of heart from the county board chairman after the fall election.

"I hope he changes it back again in six months," Mathias told the directors.

Lawlor dismissed the notion that his upcoming campaign had affected his stance. Lawlor is facing Gerri Songer, a special education teacher in Township High School District 214, in the county board election.

"I would rather lose an election than lose my integrity," he said.

With the project facing an uncertain future, Openlands wants to reserve the right to change its stance again on the Route 53 extension if the Tollway realigned itself with the original plan made by BRAC, Meyers said.

"It's definitely a large valley in between us, but we'll get there," she said.

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