

Transportation | updated: 10/12/2016 11:14 AM

# IDOT chief: Route 53 extension won't go to Rauner without 'significant support'



**Extending Route 53 north has divided the Lake County community.**

*Daily Herald file photo*



**Marni Pyke**

*The village of Hawthorn Woods opposes the Route 53 extension.*

The Route 53 extension could be a road to nowhere if Lake County isn't all-in, the state's transportation chief cautioned Friday.

"If I can't go to the governor and say there's significant support for this, we're not going to do it," Illinois Department of Transportation Secretary Randy Blankenhorn said at a forum in Deerfield.

The Route 53 project, which would stretch the road north to Route 120, has divided Lake County over cost, location, efficacy and potential damage to prairie, wetlands and wildlife.

The Illinois tollway is in the process of selecting consultants for an environmental impact study that could cost up to \$50 million.

Blankenhorn raised the possibility of reversing course while affirming his commitment to the plan, which supporters say will reduce traffic congestion and help the local economy, at a Transportation Management Association of Lake-Cook gathering.

"I think this is still a viable project," said Blankenhorn, who advanced the extension while chief of the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning.

But, "I'll be frank with you all ... I am not going to put the governor (Bruce Rauner) in front of a project that doesn't have the kind of support it needs to get done. I'm just not going to do it."

Because IDOT is cash-strapped, the Illinois tollway stepped in to plan the extension, but officials have not formally agreed to build it amid concerns about an estimated \$2 billion shortfall. Meanwhile, environmental groups in Lake County think the road will pollute natural areas.

In addition, numerous municipalities and some leaders who were on board previously now oppose the extension, most notably Lake County Chairman Aaron Lawlor.

Sticking points are a proposed gas tax, higher Lake County tolls on the Tri-State Tollway, and a 20-cent-per-mile rate on the new Route 53 compared to 6 cents average elsewhere intended to cover the funding gap.

Yet support exists among towns, including Hainesville.

"I believe there is consensus," Blankenhorn said. "Consensus is one thing, support is another. We need people saying, 'This is important to me. This is important to my community. This is important to my business. We've got to get it done.' Not just, 'I'm OK with it.'"

"If this is going to be real ... we've got to feel that this part of the region thinks this is a significant priority and maybe the highest priority. And, we've got to work together to find a way to make it happen," Blankenhorn said.

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