

Hawthorn Woods mayor on Route 53: 'Basically, we have an issue with everything'

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Hawthorn Woods leaders say the town doesn't have an official position on the concept of extending Illinois Route 53 into Lake County.

But Mayor Joe Mancino said he cannot think of a single good thing it would do for his community.

"Basically, we have an issue with everything," Mancino told an audience of about 300 that had gathered to hear his take on the road that could reshape their village, saying he was "searching for a positive" but had "yet to find one."

The state built the existing Route 53 decades ago, with a northern terminus that releases traffic onto Lake Cook Road. Since then, Illinois Department of Transportation records show that IDOT has purchased and held in reserve about 65 percent of the land that could become the finished Route 53, going 12 miles north to Illinois Route 120 in Grayslake.

The Hawthorn Woods Village Board convened a town hall meeting Monday night at St. Matthew Lutheran Church and School to share its findings about the possible highway extension with residents.

Outside, a group who said they were alarmed about the possibility of taxes paying for the extension passed out fliers and sought petition signatures.

Inside, Mancino gave a 90-minute presentation about what he said was the route's potential for both good and harm, but heavily emphasized what he said were the potential down sides.

"We think it's flawed," Mancino said of the proposal.

Part of Mancino's presentation included the history of past efforts to finish the highway — each of which ended when the political will could not overpower the price tag. But this time, it's different, Mancino said.

In 2010, the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning listed an extended Route 53 as a high priority.

"The tollway is probably the only agency in the state that is not broke," Mancino told his audience. "I have never seen this much momentum. You need to know that. This project has legs."

Mancino listed several concerns, among them that the plan calls for the highway to be elevated over Long Grove's Heron Marsh and Hawthorn Woods' Indian Creek Marsh. Any road bridged over wetlands brings risks, he said, including damage from the construction process and exposure to runoff from road salt and other pollutants.

He also said the plan would mean a long bridge snaking its way through Hawthorn Woods' skyline.

Beyond that, Mancino took issue with a "stewardship fund" that would be created to offset environmental impacts. The fund reportedly would be created with a new form of taxing district affecting only commercial and industrial properties but no residential land. He said the district would siphon off 25 percent of new revenue into an entity separate from local municipalities.

That money would be overseen by "a board, so to speak," Mancino said. "Which, by the way, worries me. You create a board, and they take a life of their own."

The current plan also calls for the creation of a "corridor planning council," which would take a wide-angle look at development along the new route, and how it should work together. Hawthorn Woods and four other villages in the highway's path — Long Grove, Round Lake, Mundelein and Kildeer — have rallied together to oppose the council, fearing that it will snatch local zoning and permit control from them.

"Right now, we keep those decisions right here in town," Mancino said.

Tollway officials received a summary of Mancino's concerns Tuesday morning, but have not returned calls seeking comment.

One of the meeting's attendees was Aaron Lawlor, president of the Lake County Board and co-chair of the advisory group putting together a Route 53 plan. After watching Mancino's presentation, Lawlor had only a brief comment.

"There were a number of valid concerns, and a number of inaccuracies, that we're going to address," Lawlor said. "I'm going to leave it at that."

Outside the church, volunteers for a group called Livable Lake County wore yellow T-shirts that urged lawmakers to not raise any taxes. Doug Ower, one of the volunteers, sought signatures for a petition and handed out fliers.

"This is not a plan for fixing congestion," he said of the current Route 53 proposal. "It's a development plan."

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