

Disharmony spreads over Route 53 plan

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As the details crystallize about what it will take to fund an extension of Illinois Route 53 into Lake County, members of the group that brought the plan this far have been talking less about where they agree and more about who might have the most to lose.

"The plans and the concepts were much more ambitious than the actual application of this, once this gets started — if it ever does" said Michael Talbett, chief village officer of Kildeer.

The project remains a major priority, according to Lake County President Aaron Lawlor. But it's being led by a committee that must balance environmental, economic, transportation and municipal-rights concerns. Its frequently unanimous or near-unanimous votes indicate years of cohesion, but as the process grinds on, recent quibbles might be the signs of unrest.

Lawlor said he sees healthy debate, not disruption.

"It probably appears that way to the public, but there's been a lot of behind-the-scenes work," he said.

"It's come along, farther than it's ever been before," he added. "But this is where the rubber hits the road."

During a meeting Tuesday in Libertyville, land-use planners discussed fissures that have developed among the municipalities apparently in line for economic gain — cracks centered on the fault line of future development.

Specifically, some towns have begun complaining that a proposed oversight body might take away their ability to make decisions about how their municipalities plan for the future.

"It actually means creating another level of approval," Hawthorn Woods Mayor Joe Mancino said after the most recent meeting. "It's taking, without compensation."

In a response letter released Wednesday, Lawlor and the committee's three other co-chairs promised they would satisfy the concerns of Mancino and his group as the process moves forward.

"The idea that we would ask the group to vote for a plan without details is not accurate," reads the letter.

For decades, Route 53's northern terminus has been Lake Cook Road. For almost as long, its owner, the Illinois Tollway, has studied the idea of extending it up to Illinois Route 120. Years of Tollway records show the estimated cost rising as each iteration of planning came and went — but Lake County's population, and the need to move those people around, rose as well.

In recent years, the Tollway put together an advisory committee, consisting of all conceivable stakeholders. In 2013, that committee's report estimated the cost of a Route 53 extension at between \$2 billion and \$3 billion.

The current proposal drives the highway through woodlands and wetlands and over creeks, forcing the committee

to consider an array of environmental solutions — and an array of revenue sources. It is in these details that members are beginning to voice disagreement.

On June 29, the leaders of Kildeer, Long Grove, Mundelein, Round Lake and Hawthorn Woods sent a joint letter to the Tollway and the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, saying they believed the proposal could undermine control of villages' long-range land-use plans.

The five officials took issue with the proposed "corridor planning committee," a new authority that, if created, might be able to fine villages that go with their individual long-range plans instead of its own. That new authority might also control who receives funding from an \$81 million special taxing district meant to pay for environmental damages.

During the meeting, Lakota Group principal Daniel Grove led a presentation about the 6,500 acres of unprotected woodlands and wetlands along the current Route 120 and the proposed Route 53.

Of that, about 1,800 acres are currently covered by long-term land-use plans of various communities, he said. The five mayors addressed this in their letter, saying they wanted to keep their comprehensive plans.

The agency that controls federal transportation money in this area, and has been lobbying heavily for Route 53's extension, wrote in its own letter dated Wednesday that the villages would be able to keep their plans. But, as Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning executive director Joseph Szabo wrote, those plans could use an update.

"The corridor market assessment determined that, in aggregate, corridor municipalities have planned for dramatically more non-residential land use than the market would support," Szabo wrote.

"Coordinating between corridor municipalities can help achieve reasonable expectations," he added.

In their June 30 letter, Lawlor's group of co-chairs also stressed villages' rights.

"It IS for creating economic opportunity," they wrote. "It is NOT for taking away municipal zoning authority."

Hawthorn Woods has issues with another aspect of the present funding plan: the fees that some nearby communities would have to pass on to developers.

At the June 30 meeting, the Route 53 land-use committee discussed the current proposal's major environmental concerns, and the need to mitigate the damages that building a highway through the area would cause. The group plans to initiate a new means of funding — similar to a tax increment financing district — that would capture increased property taxes from developments built after the highway. The money would then be funnelled into a "stewardship fund" meant to address environmental impacts. Another measure, though, might be to charge developers directly with a set of fees for environmental impacts.

The plan calls for these fees to be charged only in the route's "corridor communities" — that's Long Grove, Mundelein, Kildeer, Round Lake and Hawthorn Woods — something some officials said would drive up the cost of construction on the land closest to the new highway's traffic.

Pam Newton, Hawthorn Woods' chief operating officer, warned the subcommittee that developers might be willing to move a mile or two away from the highway to build on cheaper lots.

Newton singled out the heavy retail on Town Line Road in Vernon Hills, which is not a Route 53 corridor

community. She worried that communities like that could see a business boom, while not having to contribute police or fire support to emergencies on the highway.

Vernon Hills officials did not return phone calls seeking comment.

Meanwhile, the Tollway's top levels of leadership saw complete turnover in June. It has a new executive director, Greg Bedalov, and a new board president, Bob Schillerstrom, who both have DuPage County connections. Still, Lawlor was confident that Route 53 will be completed, and relatively soon, at that.

"I've had numerous conversations with the new chairman of the tollway board," Lawlor said. "There are a lot of details we need to work out, but the interest is there. This project is not just a transportation project."

And after the June 30 meeting, Talbett said representatives of all the communities that could be affected by the set of environmental-impact fees — his own Kildeer being one of them — should hold off on dissent until more facts are known.

"These details aren't ascertainable yet," Talbett said. "Who knows where they will ultimately end up?"

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