

News

Battle lines form in decades-old fight over extending Illinois Route 53

By **Richard Wronski** · **Contact Reporter**

Chicago Tribune

SHARE THIS



Battle lines form over Route 53/120 project.

OCTOBER 29, 2015, 7:18 PM

The battle lines have formed again in the decades-old controversy over extending a key artery, Illinois Route 53, north through Lake County. This time the fight has stirred attention well beyond the county's borders.

A key question looms on whether the Illinois Tollway should spend nearly \$6 million for an environmental impact study on the feasibility of the controversial project.

That study, if favorable, could serve to greenlight a much more costly decision by the Illinois State Toll Highway Authority board: Should the agency build a proposed \$2.65 billion tollway that would cost more to drive per mile than anywhere else in the entire system?

An advisory committee recommended in March that Lake County residents bear a major share of the construction costs, with a new county gas tax and creation of a special taxing district. But the project's cost would be shared by everyone who uses the tollway system.

Article continues below ↓

Supporters and opponents of the project have become increasingly vocal in recent months, turning out at Tollway board meetings to present their arguments.

Hawthorn Woods resident Vanessa Griffin told the Tollway board last week that constructing the highway would disrupt the environment and harm "a beautiful, calm, quiet, nature-soaked community."

Evan Craig, representing the Sierra Club, said the extension would destroy portions of the county's valuable wetlands. Furthermore, the project would result in Lake County "taxing itself to help pay for its own demise," the Vernon Hills resident said.

But Jeffrey Berman, a Buffalo Grove village trustee, countered that plans call for wetland protections and restoration of natural resources, with innovative stormwater management techniques to minimize environmental impact.

After 40 years of debate, "it's time to move forward with this critical infrastructure project that will mitigate congestion and drive renewed economic opportunity" in the county, Berman said.

Foes have organized to oppose the project. More than 100 project opponents rallied Sept. 20 at the Heron Creek Forest Preserve in Lake Zurich. Proponents have mobilized as well and recently issued a new survey of county residents that they say bolsters their case.

But three years after a special Blue Ribbon Advisory Council proclaimed that it had achieved a consensus on how the proposed "21st century urban highway" should look, Lake County communities appear to be engaged in a civil war over the issue.

The advisory council called for not only extending Route 53 north through Lake County, as originally intended, but creating a broader corridor also encompassing Route 120, which runs east-west across the county.

The plan envisions extending existing Route 53 for 12.5 miles north from Lake-Cook Road to Grayslake. There, it would form a "T" with a 12-mile stretch of Route 120, which would also be upgraded.

The new Route 53/120 corridor would be unlike the rest of the tollway system, a "parkway" limited to four lanes and a 45-mph speed limit. Advocates describe it as "a modern boulevard with a small footprint to protect the natural environment and preserve the character of Lake County."

If the extension is built, it could be the most expensive tollway to drive in the Chicago area, with a base toll of 20 cents per mile. Tollway users currently pay an average of 6 cents per mile.

Working with the [Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning](#), a county-led Land Use Committee recently completed a draft document for the corridor. This month, CMAP conducted two open houses to elicit public comment on the document.

A comprehensive plan created by CMAP, the official planning agency for the Chicago area, lists the Route 53/120 corridor project as its highest priority, citing performance measures that show it as "ranking highest among all projects in its effect on regionwide congestion."

The Land Use Committee is scheduled to meet next Nov. 5 and may sign off on the 170-page draft plan. The document is heavy on statistics and maps, but as of this week, still lacks an executive

summary containing specific recommendations.

The draft does conclude that the Route 53/120 corridor "will be a catalyst for economic development" in Lake County.

In June, leaders in Hawthorn Woods, Kildeer, Long Grove, Mundelein and Round Lake, which contend they will be the most directly affected by the highway, wrote to the Tollway expressing concern with the project's planning process.

Hawthorn Woods contends that the advisory council's report is flawed. The panel "did not include a single community in the path of the proposed Route 53 as members," the village wrote in a comment on the Land Use plan.

"Residents in this part of the county located their homes here to avoid maximum build-out of land, high density development, and commercialization of farms with industrial centers, shopping centers, and multi-story employment centers," the letter stated.

Their letter was quickly followed by one in support of the project by leaders in 40 other municipalities. Those officials asked Tollway Chairman Bob Schillerstrom and three new board members — all appointed by Gov. Bruce Rauner — for their "continued support with the next engineering and environmental studies required to keep this project moving forward."

Tollway officials say they anticipate the authority's board will make a decision on whether to authorize an environmental impact study at the agency's Dec. 17 meeting.

That's the day that the Tollway is scheduled to approve the agency's 2016 budget, which includes \$5.8 million for planning studies for "emerging projects."

Tollway Executive Director Greg Bedalov, addressing the Transportation Management Association of Lake-Cook last week, said the agency will be "looking more critically" at the project before making a decision.

Lake County Chairman Aaron Lawlor, who has championed the project and co-chaired the land use panel, told the association that the project has a "tremendous amount of support" throughout the county and urged the Tollway to proceed with an environmental impact study.

One alternative that some have suggested, widening some 56 miles of existing arterial highways, would cost an estimated \$2.8 billion, more than the proposed Route 53/120 project, Lawlor said.

Furthermore, there is no source of funds for this work, unlike the "more certain future" that is

offered by the Tollway, Lawlor said.

An analysis by the development group Lake County Partners determined that the Route 53-120 corridor project would generate \$17 billion to \$19 billion in economic impact and create 25,000 to 30,000 jobs, Lawlor said.

"When you look at all the alternatives," Lawlor said, "the project is less costly, it has more environmental benefits, and it leverages the collective will of our mayors, economic development professionals and environmental leaders to work together in a collaborative manner for smart growth."

rwronski@tribpub.com

Twitter @richwronski

Copyright © 2015, Chicago Tribune

This article is related to: [Environmental Science](#), [Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning](#)

[VIEW COMMENTS \(47\)](#)

Content Continues Below

