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Committee OKs economic impact report on Route 53 extension

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Tollway's land use committee approves Route 53 plan with 15-5 vote.

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Officials recently discussed a report about the potential economic impact of a long-debated extension of Illinois Route 53 into Lake County and a wider Illinois Route 120, and learned the project may have lost support from the environmental groups that took part in the planning.

With a 15-5 vote Thursday, a Route 53 planning committee approved the final version of a report, unveiled in September, outlining the potential economic impact and development effects that Route 53/120 could have on Lake County. The report contains no specific recommendation on whether or not the project should be built.

Previously outlined plans call for Route 53's extension to traverse a low-level bridge over the Indian Creek Marsh in Hawthorn Woods and the Heron Marsh in Long Grove.

But the land use committee's vote, which took place at the College of Lake County in Grayslake, does not set any wheels into motion, for two reasons.

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The first of which is that the recommendations must first go to the Illinois Tollway's board of directors, which will first need to authorize an environment impact report. Other hurdles include the purchase of some of the land upon which the proposed roads would be built.

Also, local leaders said that because of a technicality, the vote is unofficial. Joe Mancino, mayor of Hawthorn Woods, had accused the organizers of failing to post the agenda at the building's front door 48 hours in advance — a violation of the state's Open Meetings Act. Officials said organizers could not prove at the meeting that they had posted an agenda, but took the vote anyway in case they later could.

On Friday afternoon, CMAP announced that it could not confirm an agenda's posting, and a second meeting had to be scheduled for Thursday, Nov. 12 at the Lake County Permit Facility, 500 W. Winchester Road, Libertyville. At that meeting, the committee will take the same vote again.

The most recent estimates price the extension and Route 120 bypass at between \$2.35 billion and \$2.65 billion, in 2020 dollars. In March, a separate panel assembled to finance its construction came up with a package of new taxes and other funding sources — including a 4-cents-per-gallon gasoline tax for Lake County, which would bring Lake up to the other collar counties' level — but the committee's final report notes that this package will only generate between \$745 million and \$993 million.

Opposition to the concept continues to come from some residents and elected officials who live in its path. At the most recent meeting Thursday night, they expressed concern about their property values and quality of life.

"They're going to hear the highway, they're going to feel the highway," said Diane Stark of Grayslake.

Most of the meeting's audience of about 100 spoke against the development, but a few said they see positives to the plan.

Bonnie Thompson Carter, who represents the Fox Lake area on the Lake County Board, pointed out that, had the [Illinois Department of Transportation](#) finished the Route 53 expansion in past decades, the result likely would have been much more harmful to the environment than the committee's current recommendations.

"Our life will improve with it," she said.

The project would include an expanded Route 120 in the Grayslake area and an extension of Route 53 from its current terminus at Lake Cook Road up to the new bypass. To find means for building the roads, the Tollway assembled a "Blue Ribbon Advisory Committee," which has included government officials, as well as representatives of both environmental groups and commercial interests.

As that committee first began its review, preservation organizations like Openlands in Chicago and the Liberty Prairie Foundation in Grayslake offered tentative support, and took part in the planning. At the land use committee's Thursday meeting, though, both withdrew that support, saying the plan lacked too many details.

"We hoped to create a national model" of how a highway could be made environmentally sound,

said Stacy Meyers, an attorney for Openlands. "We did not. Openlands cannot support its adoption."

Michael Stevens, president of economic development group Lake County Partners, said the roads' benefits could not be ignored.

"This will help us be competitive going forward," Stevens said. "It's going to help us compete with communities that don't care about it, it's going to help us compete with other states."

One of the committee's innovations is a proposal for what officials are saying is a first-of-its-kind tax increment financing district that would overlay several municipalities. That TIF would capture property tax funding only from commercial properties built after the road and would then funnel 25 percent of that revenue into a fund earmarked to mitigate environmental damage caused by the highway. A new board, which the proposal says will be composed of representatives from several of the affected jurisdictions, would oversee the new fund.

During Thursday's meeting, Aaron Lawlor, Lake County Board chairman and one of the land use committee's co-chairs, said this was not the end of discussions on the economic development impact of Route 53.

"I understand the concerns about the completeness of the plan," Lawlor said. "There's more work to do. We need to bring the communities together."

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