

No Exit

Opposition to the Innerbelt project grows, but ODOT drives ahead.



SAFETY FIRST "It's your families, your friends... in these crashes," said ODOT's Proctor.

By Michael Gill

THE RED PIN PRICK of the laser pointer danced over the map as ODOT's Innerbelt project manager Craig Hebrbrand and director Gordon Proctor took turns explaining how rebuilding the busiest section of roadway in the state with fewer exits will help the city thrive.

About 200 people in the ballroom at Myers University Club listened as the two men talked about how dangerous the road is, how successful other ODOT projects have been, and how the whole thing can be prettied up with pressed concrete and tinted sealer. But the people were concerned about what the \$900 million highway project will do to businesses that have grown up depending on traffic from the exits, and on some of the city's major downtown attractions.

"Early on, the belief was that this was a very local issue," says Midtown Cleveland executive director Jim Haviland, who has spearheaded concerns of businesses and community development corporations affected by the project. "But we were saying from the beginning that this will affect not just midtown, but downtown, University Circle, and the region. In an urban area that now has multiple convenient access points, having them eliminated leaves us at competitive disadvantage."

The most telling sentence of the morning was spoken as an aside, a footnote to an answer about why the agency hasn't yet finished an economic development study that was promised six weeks ago. On the way to explaining, Proctor said simply, "This is the first and only economic development study ever done by ODOT. We don't have a deep history of studying economic development" impacts of highway projects.

The discussion has come down to the trench — the cluster of exits that serve midtown, University Circle, and downtown with access to Broadway, Prospect, Carnegie, Chester, Superior and Payne avenues. In rebuilding the Innerbelt, the transportation agency plans to remove exits at Prospect, Carnegie and Broadway, the theory being that fewer exits mean less crossing traffic and fewer accidents.

The entire corridor will be moved to the east to make way for marginal roads that link streets that currently have direct freeway connections. The massive shift will require ODOT to buy or take 19 buildings by eminent domain. Ward 13 councilman Joe Cimperman says the threat has already halted two business proposals for the area.

ODOT has been selling the safety issue hard. ODOT ranks the stretch of highway as the most dangerous "hot spot" in the state. "It's your families, your friends, your employees, your customers that are being involved in these crashes," Proctor told the crowd, underscoring a Power Point slide.

And from the traffic engineer's perspective, the discussion need go no further than safety.

But once the whole project is complete, downtown neighborhoods will change as some streets lose much of the traffic that has been the lifeblood of their businesses. Meanwhile, critics fear that other streets could overload and bog down, turning a trip to Jacobs Field

or the Q into a gridlocked odyssey.

It's easy to imagine the perfect storm of a September night, busy with all downtown has to offer. Someone driving from Euclid to see the Tribe will no longer exit at Prospect, a corridor only a decade ago beautified to serve as the gateway to Gateway. Instead, the Tribe fan will get off at Chester. Playhouse Square traffic will also get off at Chester. As will traffic for the Q. And the House of Blues. And CSU's Wolstein Center.

And if our visitor from Euclid happens to miss Chester, or if there is an accident there, his next chance to get back on track involves crossing the Cuyahoga, exiting at West 14th in Tremont, and turning around.

"People just don't believe the system will operate," Hebrbrand concedes in an interview. "I get a lot of feedback that the street grid will fail."

Some critics are concerned that reducing the number of downtown exits will help motorists bypass the city completely, which — in tandem with proposals for new exits far out in the suburbs — further dilutes the strength of the central city.

By coincidence, a group of businesses in the city of Avon recently released a new study to urge the state to build a new interchange at Nagle Road, between Crocker Road and Route 83, about one mile into Lorain County. The land owners want the exit to support their plans for new housing, office buildings and industrial sites — the same kind of argument Midtown Cleveland's Haviland and others are making to keep the Innerbelt exits. Haviland, who once worked for the Jacobs Group, knows what new exits do for development.

"People who are choosing to locate stores at Crocker Park wouldn't be doing that if they were told the access was going to be removed," Haviland said.

CLEVELAND INDIANS Vice President of Operations Jim Folk is complimentary to ODOT for the range of neighborhood issues the agency has tackled to date in the immensely complicated project, which begins with smoothing out Dead Man's Curve, and ends with a new bridge to Tremont, with a redesigned central interchange and trench in between.

But having recognized that ODOT has "addressed some concerns," he says there's work to do before the Indians will be happy.

"I think that as this process goes on, we're still seeing the need for additional or relocated ramps from what we saw in the most recent plan," he says. "My sense is this will be good for the city, but you've got to make sure you can get downtown."

Folks notes that the team was "not comfortable with the plan we saw in November." And as it turned out, Tuesday's presentation was not much different. As Hebrbrand said, "None of the changes include restoring the Carnegie and Prospect ramps. There is no alternative that would make it operate better and safer while retaining those exits."

A coalition of community development corporations hopes to move ODOT from that position.

"We think they could consolidate to logical places and make the road safer without stomping all over economic development issues," says Tom Starynski, project director

for Gateway Neighborhood Corporation. "All these businesses have grown up around this access. You have to be respectful of where people have built their livelihoods."

The CDCs have had success negotiating other parts of the plan. But midtown businesses have been telling ODOT their Innerbelt concerns since December 2003, with little apparent impact. At that time, the transportation agency was still presenting other alternatives.

Haviland supported a version of the plan that kept the trench infrastructure intact, but made modifications to straighten Dead Man's Curve, rebuild the bridge, and the central interchange. But that plan was taken off the table in July.

Haviland urged the state to take 60 days to "exhaust all avenues and find a win-win solution," and Proctor said he assumed that discussion would be ongoing. Whether that will lead to real compromise remains to be seen.

"The community has this gut feeling that this just isn't going to work," Haviland said. "And there's been this absence of key information, like traffic modeling or an economic impact study, to prove or dispel concerns. Without that, it's ODOT with all their engineers vs the community. And meanwhile, elected officials have to make a decision that they hope won't have adverse affect on the city for decades to come."

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