



THE PLAIN DEALER

ODOT's Inner Belt project needs more public scrutiny before the concrete hardens

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Cities in Asia and the Persian Gulf are investing heavily in new bridges, airports, highways and high-speed rail systems. Infrastructure in American cities, including the highways that converge on downtown Cleveland, are aging and in need of repair.

The mission to redesign Cleveland's downtown Inner Belt -- one of the biggest highway projects in the city's history -- took a deep dive last year and hasn't come up for air yet.

The Ohio Department of Transportation shut down public meetings abruptly last summer for at least a year. ODOT wants federal highway officials to approve critical paperwork before inviting any more comments from its clients -- that is, from us.

Meanwhile, the concrete is beginning to set on plans for a colossal project now estimated to cost \$1.65 billion and to last from 2010 to 2023.

Few seemed to care about the silence on the project, which is understandable. Highway planning, to judge by ODOT's handling of the Inner Belt, is slow, complicated, eye-glazing and at times excruciating.

So who needs more talk on the topic? We do.

Highways and other types of public infrastructure shape the fate of a city. If big pieces of civil engineering are planned poorly, the damage can last a century. Done right, big projects can improve life, provide visual delight and burnish a city's image.

Silence on the Inner Belt is worrying because there's evidence that the planning has been inefficient, incomplete and short on creativity. The results may hurt more than they help. According to the design now under consideration, the project will:

leave Cleveland for half a century or more with an odd pair of mismatched bridges to carry I-90 traffic over the Cuyahoga River;

push the I-90 right-of-way and the city's central highway interchange closer to the south side of downtown, imposing a fortress-like retaining wall near the Gateway sports complex;

cause rush-hour congestion on city streets during and after construction by shutting down or squeezing lanes temporarily and removing several downtown exits permanently;

include an eastbound off-ramp for Carnegie Avenue that would prevent local institutions from capping a portion of the Inner Belt trench so they can merge over the highway.

When ODOT launched the planning for the Inner Belt in January 2000, the possibilities were huge. The project promised to pour hundreds of millions of federal and state dollars into the local economy.

It had the potential to undo at least some of the damage inflicted on the city in the 1950s and '60s, when the

interstate highway system collided with the downtown street grid.

The Inner Belt, a 5-mile artery that connects Interstates 71, 77 and 90, carved a huge gash on the east and south sides of downtown, leaving a moat between the center city and nearby neighborhoods.

Now, despite cries that the city wanted the project to strengthen its economy, the main thrust is to reduce the number of downtown exits to improve safety and traffic flow. Oh, and it will smooth out "Dead Man's Curve."

Statistics show that the Inner Belt is the most accident-prone stretch of highway in the state. But that begs the question whether ODOT could have done more to help the city grow while making the Inner Belt safer.

The agency's own economic-impact study on the project shows that by 2035, the city would gain only a few hundred permanent jobs, a puny payback for a huge investment.

A clamor is growing for quick construction of Opportunity Corridor, a boulevard that would link I-490 and the rest of the interstate highway system directly to University Circle, the city's only fast-growing employment center.

But ODOT is plowing ahead on the Inner Belt first, while delaying Opportunity Corridor a decade or more.

That's wrongheaded, says Edward Hill, interim dean of the Levin College of Public Affairs at Cleveland State University and a highly respected expert on economic development.

"We're going to see jobs go to the suburbs," he said. "The city's going to suffer. That's where the tragedy's going to lie."

More than anything, the Inner Belt is shaping up as an example of how American cities are losing the ability to manage large infrastructure projects for maximum positive impact.

The competition, meanwhile, is gaining fast. Cities in Asia and the Persian Gulf have built stunning new airports, highways and bridges. They get the connection between infrastructure and economic strength.

Cleveland and other American cities are in the slow lane, their guts and bones falling apart. The fallen levees in New Orleans, the explosion of a steam pipe in New York and the collapse of the I-35 bridge in Minneapolis, which killed 13 and injured 121, are only the most dramatic examples.

The American Society of Civil Engineers estimates the country needs to spend \$1.6 trillion over the next five years to catch up with repairs. Ernst & Young and the Urban Land Institute say the shortfall is \$170 billion a year.

Certainly, ODOT can't be blamed for a political climate in which spending on infrastructure is often equated with pork.

Craig Hebebrand, ODOT's project manager for the Inner Belt, points out that the 18.4-cent-a-gallon gas tax, which fuels the federal trust fund that pays for highway construction and repair, hasn't gone up in 15 years.

He also said that most of the funding for the Inner Belt depends on a new federal transportation bill that will be enacted after the current one expires in 2009.

"Beyond some vague assumptions, we don't have a clear idea of the revenues available," he said.

Ohio cities

shortchanged

Critics also point out that Ohio has had a long and strong bias against cities when it comes to highway spending. Hill co-authored "Slanted Pavement," a 2003 study published by the Brookings Institution in

Washington, D.C., showing that Cleveland and other Ohio cities have never received their fair share. That's a political problem, not one that can be pinned on the ODOT bureaucracy.

ODOT also is not to blame for the sudden spike in the cost of construction materials, caused by heavy demand in developing countries.

But the adverse circumstances only made it all the more urgent for ODOT to move quickly and brilliantly on the Inner Belt, which it hasn't.

Hebebrand said the complexity of the project has justified the eight years spent on it so far. But he admits the work has been flawed in at least some respects.

For example, it took ODOT a full five years to realize it was physically impossible to widen the I-90 bridge by hanging more lanes on either side of the structure. That was five years in which other options weren't pursued strenuously. Five years in which inflation spiked.

In a 2006 letter, former ODOT director Gordon Proctor himself criticized Burgess & Niple, the engineering firm hired by the agency to design the Inner Belt, for dragging its feet.

The firm contested the criticism, but ODOT has since hired a second company, TranSystem, to speed up slow-moving paperwork.

As the work dragged on, inflation took its bite as cost estimates climbed and climbed. ODOT slashed the scope of the project, in part to cut the price and in part to speed up repairs on the I-90 bridge, a structure similar to the type that collapsed in Minneapolis.

ODOT originally planned to repair the bridge -- which it says is safe to use now -- to keep it up and running for about another 20 years. At that time, the agency wanted to build two new, east- and westbound spans by 2025, after which the old bridge would come down.

Scrapping that plan, ODOT now wants to spend enough between 2010 and 2012 to keep the old bridge up and running for another 50 years. Then it will build only one new bridge to carry five lanes of westbound traffic. The proposed eastbound bridge has been dumped.

The plan sounds sensible, but it won't save any money, due to inflation. The current estimated total cost for Inner Belt work, including the rehab of the I-90 bridge, is \$1.65 billion, or \$150 million higher than last year.

One likely area to cut costs is the design of the westbound bridge. Plans call for a cable-stayed tower design that is both a cliché and technically unnecessary to support the 450-foot main span over the river.

In 2004, Cuyahoga County Planning Commissioner Paul Alsenas came up with the idea of building a single new, two-way bridge now to replace the current I-90 bridge.

That idea offered huge advantages, including the opportunity to move the city's central highway interchange farther away from Gateway, not closer, as ODOT now proposes.

But ODOT rejected the idea early in 2006, saying it would require slicing off a corner of the Greek Orthodox Church of the Annunciation in Tremont or shutting down I-90 bridge traffic entirely for two years or more.

An engineering firm other than Burgess & Niple might have found a way around that problem. It's getting very late to try to find out.

Exit ramp

causes concern

If the bridge cries out for a second look, so does ODOT's downright irrational concept for combining a Carnegie Avenue exit ramp with the retaining walls to support a "cap" over the Inner Belt trench between East 22nd and East 24th streets.

Last fall, ODOT agreed to entreaties from St. Vincent Charity Hospital, Cuyahoga Community College and Cleveland State University to provide retaining walls strong enough to hold a cap over the highway so they can grow together in the future to form "University Circle West."

ODOT agreed to spend the extra \$8 million on the retaining walls.

The problem is that ODOT is also trying to please Midtown Cleveland Inc. by including an eastbound exit ramp for Carnegie Avenue in precisely the same spot.

The latest drawing of the idea shows that the ramp would slice right across the south side of the highway cap, creating a gap 26 feet wide and 25 feet deep at the deepest. The drawing is a marvel of cognitive dissonance.

"I'm trying to find the words," said William Beckenbach, director of the Quadrangle, the nonprofit planning agency that represents St. Vincent, Tri-C and CSU. "It's awful."

Cleveland and ODOT certainly have the capacity to fix such details.

The city and the state agency agreed this year after an impasse about how to rebuild portions of the high-speed West Shoreway to improve connections between neighborhoods and Lake Erie.

On the Inner Belt, ODOT eliminated an ugly flyover ramp that would have sliced across the east end of the Lorain-Carnegie (Hope Memorial) Bridge and the facade of Progressive Field.

The agency is also trying to move the Inner Belt to avoid demolishing the loft building at East 30th Street that houses the Zygote Press print studio and Tastebuds Restaurant.

But the snafu over the Carnegie exit raises serious doubts about the entire project.

Hebebrand and Bonnie Teeuwen, ODOT District 12 director, say public meetings on the Inner Belt will resume this year after federal authorities finish a preliminary review of a draft Environmental Impact Statement.

At that point however, it's likely that both ODOT and the city will be under enormous political pressure to push ahead before federal funding evaporates and inflation takes an even greater toll.

All the more reason why the Inner Belt needs more public scrutiny. Now.

Litt is architecture critic of The Plain Dealer.

To reach Steven Litt:

slitt@plaind.com, 216-999-4136

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