

You can't stop a speeding ODOT

An agency blind to anything but pavement is about to run over downtown

THOMAS BIER

The feds have given their OK to the environmental impact of the Ohio Department of Transportation's planned reconstruction of the Inner Belt. The appalling attack on Cleveland's downtown and the businesses and institutions in the Midtown Corridor out to and including University Circle continues.

Principal items in this debacle involve closing the ramps at Prospect Avenue, closing the Carnegie Avenue ramp (you'll exit at East 22nd Street instead), and closing the Interstate 77 exit at East Ninth Street (you'll exit at East 30th Street/Woodland Avenue instead).

That's all. ODOT's position from Day One has been "no problem" — as if those major changes would have no negative impact on city streets.

Over the past six years, there have been numerous ODOT presentations to the public and opportunities for affected parties to comment. Other than the Jackson administration (but not Cleveland City Council), I can't recall a single person speaking in favor of the ODOT plan. Business leaders, representatives of our medical institutions, the Cleveland Indians (boy, will Gateway be affected) have all said, essentially, "This is crazy. How can this be?"

It can be because ODOT says it will be.

ODOT's position is that too many accidents occur on the Inner Belt as traffic weaves in and out. But before ODOT came along with its plan, was there an outcry from any corner (hospital emergency rooms, City Hall, auto insurance companies, the public) that something had to be done about the unsafe Inner Belt? I don't think so.

It is apparent that highway traffic engineering is what rules ODOT, not thoughtful engagement among the engineers and the parties who would be affected by what the engineers have in mind. What matters is the highway, period.

That is evident in ODOT's Project Development Process, the 14 steps ODOT goes through in planning and implementing a major project such as the Inner Belt construction. In that process, "identifying impacts to the local street system as a result of proposed [ramp] changes" hardly qualifies as an afterthought. That critical step is positioned in the fine print of Step 6.

The engineers knew long before Step 6 what they wanted to do with the Inner Belt and had all kinds of technical analyses to back them up. The affected parties had only their knowledge of how traffic actually moves and their sense of how it would be affected by the ramp changes — which, in the face of ODOT's technicality, meant nothing.

The public meetings and associated discussions were essentially sham events. Political correctness required them. (It must have been excruciating for the engineers to sit through them.)

The ODOT mentality brings to mind Wall Street. The Wall Street wizards created ways — very technical, very analytical — of distributing and obviating investment risk to the point where it simply disappeared (until the cards collapsed).

Now the ODOT wizards have their very technical, very analytical studies of traffic on and near the Inner Belt, which they use to obviate risk and counter those who say, "What you want to do may very well cause major damage to downtown and the economic heart of the city." Response: It can't happen.

ODOT is an empire that simply does what it wants to do. (I wonder if it even takes orders from the governor.) As Cleveland and other Ohio cities struggle against immense odds to have a viable future, that kind of ODOT simply worsens the odds.

On Tuesday, April 21, the final event for commenting on the plan will be held. Don't bother, folks; it's all a sham. You'd be better off going to the Indians game. They're playing Kansas City.

Bier is an executive-in-residence at the Levin College of Urban Affairs, Cleveland State University.

PUBLIC COMMENT

Let your voice be heard

What: A public hearing to discuss the Inner Belt Project's draft environmental impact statement.

Where: Annunciation Greek Orthodox Church, 2187 West 14th St., Cleveland.

When: 4 to 8 p.m. Tuesday, April 21.

Details: Comments at the meeting and those submitted to the Ohio Department of Transportation by Thursday, May 21, will be considered in a final environmental statement. They may be sent to Craig Hebebrand at the Ohio Department of Transportation District 12, 5500 Transportation Blvd., Garfield Heights, OH 44125. The draft environment statement is posted at www.Innerbelt.org.

— Karen Farkas

INSIDE: The National Surface Transportation Infrastructure Financing Commission was charged by Congress to break the gridlock on paying for roads. **66**