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Funding approach adds local influence

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FRANKFORT, Ky. — Kentucky lawmakers approved a funding approach Wednesday for major transportation initiatives, including the \$4.1-billion Ohio River Bridges Project.

The legislation marks a shift toward local management of such projects.

In the case of the bridges project, which has nearly ground to a halt amid financing difficulties, the bill allows the Louisville Metro Council to authorize creation of an authority with Kentucky and Indiana members to draft construction and financing plans, most likely involving tolls.

"The ball's in their court," House Speaker Pro Tem Larry Clark, D-Louisville, said of local officials. "Now they have to have a plan and move it forward. There are no excuses."

Still, Rep. Scott Brinkman, R-Louisville, cautioned that many other hurdles remain before construction can start on two bridges to Clark County, Ind., and a redesigned Spaghetti Junction interchange downtown.

"It's only the first step in a series of steps before the project becomes an absolute reality," he said.

The bill, which Gov. Steve Beshear supports, would apply only to major transportation projects, including a proposed Interstate 69 bridge near Henderson, Ky. Oversight would be vested in two groups — a local authority and a state authority headed by Kentucky's transportation secretary.

For projects that involve Indiana, the local authority would include Hoosier members.

Projects involving Kentucky and other states aren't covered by the bill.

The Metro Council will have to ask Louisville Mayor Jerry Abramson and Beshear to appoint a group to work with Indiana to create the bi-state authority. The decision to create such an authority would need to be ratified by the state authority and the General Assembly.

The key decisions on the Louisville project, such as whether to impose tolls, would be made by the bi-state authority.

Kentucky's membership would come from four people appointed by Louisville's mayor and three named by the governor. The number of Indiana members is still to be determined.

The bill's passage is "a positive step towards some new bridges across the Ohio River," said Jane Jankowski, a spokeswoman for Indiana Gov. Mitch Daniels. Indiana plans to pay its \$1.1-billion share largely with proceeds from leasing the Northern Indiana toll road to a private consortium.

The transportation provisions were contained in House Bill 3, which also included economic development measures. It passed the Senate unanimously and cleared the House 86-10 after negotiators from both chambers reached a compromise Tuesday night.

"The end result is that we've come up with a better plan. We're going to have the community, through the Metro Council, weigh in on the project," said Sen. Tim Shaughnessy, D-Louisville.

"It's important," Brinkman said. "I think it's why we created merged government."

"It is a very good day for the economic viability of our region," Abramson said.

Metro Council President David Tandy said he expects to move quickly. A resolution could be introduced by July 16, he said, followed by committee meetings.

"Certainly this is an issue that doesn't merit any laborious hearings, because we've vetted this issue for quite some time now," Tandy said.

Plans for the project were discussed in a series of meetings leading up to federal authorization in 2003. Since then, however, the price tag has climbed from \$2.5 billion to \$4.1 billion, and lawmakers began considering tolls to help cover construction costs.

The project will lead to thousands of new jobs, said Ed Glasscock, chairman of The Bridges Coalition, a group of businesses, labor organizations and local governments backing the project.

"The overwhelming vote for the legislation speaks volumes for the need for the project, the benefits it will bring and the strong support for getting the bridges built," Glasscock said.

Critics of the bridges project had mixed reactions to the legislation.

Metro Council members "need to be careful what they kick-start," said Jackie Green, a public transportation advocate. "Are they kick-starting an authority that is going to result in tolling the citizens?"

The bill requires the local and state authorities to comply with a project's previous agreements, federal authorizations and other contracts.

But Tyler Allen — a co-founder of the group 8664, which favors turning a section of elevated Interstate 64 downtown into a surface-level parkway and wants only an eastern Jefferson County bridge — noted that the bill may allow for "modification" to the projects.

"We are very pleased that the Metro Council will have the chance to debate this project and that this bill allows for the flexibility, given all the changing circumstances, to come up with a plan that's best for Louisville's future," Allen said.

The conservation group River Fields, which opposes the eastern Jefferson County bridge, noted that the bill requires state and federal approval of any financial plan before construction can start.

"We look forward to participating in the review that will be necessary to comply with environmental laws if tolls are chosen as part of this financial plan," River Fields attorney Robert Griffith said.

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Additional Facts

Bill at a glance

The Metro Council would ask Louisville Mayor Jerry Abramson and Kentucky Gov. Steve Beshear to appoint a group of Kentucky members to work with Indiana to create a bi-state authority for the Ohio River Bridges Project. A Kentucky state authority and the General Assembly would have to ratify the creation of the bi-state authority. Indiana would have to sign off on the bi-state authority. Kentucky's membership on the bi-state authority would be four people appointed by Louisville's mayor and three by the governor. The bi-state authority would prepare a financing plan, including a construction schedule, amount and duration of any tolls and Kentucky's expected contribution. The state authority would have to approve the financial plan.
