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## Businesses voice support for bridges funding bill

*By Marcus Green*

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Nearly 70 businesses, including UPS, Ford Motor and General Electric, announced support yesterday for legislation that would help pay for the Ohio River Bridges Project.

The endorsement by members of Greater Louisville Inc.'s advanced manufacturing and logistics network comes as the Kentucky General Assembly prepares to consider the bill during next week's special session.

Kerry Stemler, president of New Albany, Ind., trucking company K.M. Stemler Co., and a longtime project supporter, acknowledged problems that have slowed the effort to build two new bridges and reconfigure the Spaghetti Junction interchange.

"We're looking to the future and we simply must get it built," Stemler said at a news conference at Eagle Steel Co. in eastern Jefferson County.

The bill Gov. Steve Beshear proposed on Thursday would allow an authority between Kentucky and Indiana that would include appointees by Louisville's mayor and the governor. The authority would finance, construct and operate the bridges project.

A separate state authority would have to approve the local financing and construction plans.

Tolls would be a likely funding source and Stemler said the logistics group wants officials to consider all financing approaches.

"In our opinion, no option is off the table," he said.

Jeff Uligian, who chairs the logistics network, said the project is vital to job growth. "Let's turn our biggest roadblock into our biggest building block," he said.

Beshear's bill, however, hit a key obstacle shortly after he unveiled it on Thursday.

The governor's plan applies to the Louisville project and a proposed interstate bridge near Henderson, Ky. But, contrary to previous legislative efforts, it doesn't open funding to other large road ventures across the state.

House Speaker Pro Tem Larry Clark, who worked with Rep. Darryl Owens, chairman of Louisville's Frankfort delegation, and other Louisville leaders, has said Beshear bucked the will of local officials.

Clark said he's not inclined to support Beshear's plan because it fails to ensure that all large projects have the same financial guidelines -- including the likelihood of tolls. Clark said Louisville lawmakers may view the bill as clearing the way for tolls in Louisville but not for projects elsewhere.

Unless the legislation is changed, Clark said, "I think that the bill may not ever be called."

Blanton said Beshear plans to talk with lawmakers over the weekend. If the bill "needs to be expanded, we'll do so," Blanton said.

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