



February 1, 2009

Gaining revenue for bridges

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Special to The Courier-Journal

The future of Louisville and Southern Indiana -- our ability to keep and attract good jobs and provide a high quality of life -- depends on completing the Ohio River Bridges Project.

Crucial legislation that will jump-start construction and put the project on a fast track to completion is before the Kentucky General Assembly. State lawmakers can create thousands of jobs now and for future generations by supporting this legislation, which would allow creation of a public infrastructure authority to issue bonds and tap new revenue options to help pay for the project.

Without action, increased congestion and safety issues will choke off Louisville and Southern Indiana, and reverse our important standing as a logistics and economic hub. All three of our region's existing bridges will be carrying more traffic than they were designed to handle, safety issues will not be addressed, pollution will increase, and daily congestion will be "extreme," according to a federal study.

Imagine what our region will be like with this project's completion. A new east end bridge will provide a needed link in a cross-river regional network, improving access. The east end bridge will help -- but will not solve -- congestion problems downtown. Downtown, the new northbound I-65 bridge will provide the congestion relief and capacity our region must have on one of the nation's major interstate highways and commerce routes.

Spaghetti Junction where I-65, I-64 and I-71 converge -- the site of about 10 accidents a week -- will be moved slightly to the south and brought up to safety standards, resulting in improved and more scenic ground level access to the downtown waterfront. The new Spaghetti Junction -- minus the tangles -- will provide a bonus of freeing up an additional 45 acres of land adjacent to Waterfront Park.

The bridges and redesigned Spaghetti Junction will include dedicated and safe regional cross-river bike and pedestrian lanes, and the foundation for expanding public transportation.

After all the years of debates and studies, we have all heard the comments that it will never be built, that the escalating price, now at \$4.1 billion, is too much. But we need to get beyond the frustration and work to reduce the costs to make the project's completion a reality as quickly as possible.

Let's be frank: The existing Louisville/Southern Indiana cross-river transportation system is obsolete and growing unsafe for the 240,000 vehicles that use it daily. Congestion in Louisville is worse than in Cincinnati, Nashville, Kansas City, and at least eight other mid-size cities in America, according to the Texas Transportation Institute. Louisville is the 45th largest city in population, and the 25th worst city in congestion based on a national analysis. The situation will not get better by itself and it will not be free.

A new Ohio River Bridge has not been built in the Louisville region in nearly 50 years. The overall cost to our economy, if we do not complete the entire project, will be even greater than the cost to build it. We cannot afford NOT to build the bridges, and we will experience significant benefits as soon as major construction begins.

The project will create thousands of jobs now through construction and help sustain our economy for generations. In Louisville and Southern Indiana alone, logistics and distribution industries account for 64,000 jobs. Thousands of additional jobs rely on safe, efficient cross-river transportation in the region. To retain these and other jobs and create additional jobs, we must have a safe, reliable bridge and connecting highways.

So what's the holdup? Funding.

We are as frustrated as anyone with the federal government's inability to provide needed funding , here and elsewhere, and we will continue to seek every possible state and federal funding opportunity.

But we cannot wait for the federal government to provide the funds. A growing number of states and communities have already adopted new funding measures -- including tolls, local taxes and fees -- to upgrade their bridges and roads. In the past decade, 40 percent of all major roads in the country relied on toll revenue, according to a Congressional study.

Indiana has secured its \$1.1 billion share of the Bridges Project largely through revenue generated from an innovative lease of the Indiana Toll Road in Northern Indiana.

Kentucky must find a way to provide its nearly \$3 billion share. The state's six-year road plan is in dire shape, with an estimated \$3 billion shortfall. State officials have said the Bridges Project and other needed projects -- including the I-71/I-75 Brent Spence replacement in Northern Kentucky -- will not be built without new revenue sources.

Proposed Kentucky legislation (Senate Bill 15 and House Bill 102) provides the framework for a solution with a new optional toll, a public infrastructure authority that would keep the project in public hands. It would have the ability to issue bonds that would not count against the state's debt capacity. The Louisville Arena Authority operates in much the same way and has kept that project on a fast track.

We favor a bi-state local authority for the Bridges Project that would include representatives from Louisville and Southern Indiana so that decisions about project financing and revenue are kept at the local level as much as possible.

Public authorities are used in at least 12 states to generate funds for bridges and roads, including some that are regionally or locally based, and the concept is not new to Kentucky.

We believe all possible funding options should be considered, including high-speed, all-electronic tolling. Modern tolling -- which means no slowing down and no toll booths -- allows commuters and other frequent users to pay reduced rates, so out-of-state traffic will pay a significant share of the costs.

Whatever the funding options, the first step is the public authority legislation to create a framework for pursuing options not currently permitted under state law.

The Bridges Project has the necessary federal agency approvals, with much of the design work completed and some right-of-way purchased on both sides of the river. All federal and state transportation agencies fully approved and authorized the Bridges Project in 2003, citing the two new bridges and the rebuild of Spaghetti Junction as the only feasible solution for the pressing cross-river transportation needs in the region.

The project has strong public support in Louisville and Southern Indiana. More than \$120 million has been spent on the project in the past five years.

These are tough economic times and it is more important than ever that we pursue job growth now and for future generations. Kentucky legislation, giving communities the option of partnering with the state and forming a public authority, is urgently needed.

There is no more important project for the future of Louisville and Southern Indiana than the Ohio River Bridges Project. We urge everyone to let their state legislators know the project must be completed as soon and as cost effectively as possible.

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