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Indiana panel may focus on Ohio River bridges

Members to coordinate bi-state efforts to build spans over the Ohio River

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INDIANAPOLIS – Projects to build Ohio River bridges – including the two at Louisville and one between Madison, Ind., and Milton, Ky. -- would be coordinated in Indiana by a new commission if a bill approved yesterday by a House committee becomes law.

The proposed Ohio River Bridges Projects Commission would bring together transportation officials, lawmakers, the governor and a congressional representative to study funding, environmental issues and bi-state cooperation for such projects.

The group would also seek ways to make construction happen sooner.

"We feel strongly that there needs to be attention given specifically to these projects in this corridor to coordinate not only local efforts but all the stakeholders that are involved in these projects," said the bill's author, Rep. Steve Stemler, D-Jeffersonville. "This is a regional transportation bill that's going to have tremendous value for economic development."

Advocates of the bridges at Louisville and Madison came to the Statehouse yesterday to testify for House Bill 1226, which passed the Roads and Transportation Committee unanimously. It now goes to the full House for consideration.

Joe Reagan, president of Greater Louisville Inc. and a part of the Build the Bridges Coalition, told lawmakers that the Louisville bridges project has federal approval and is "ready to go," but funding and coordination issues remain.

"There is a great commitment," Reagan said. But every year the \$4.1 billion, two-state project is delayed will add \$400 million to the cost, he said.

That's the kind of issue the Ohio River Bridges Projects Commission is meant to tackle, its authors said.

"The commission would have single-purpose oversight," said Rep. Dave Cheatham, D-North Vernon, a co-author whose district includes the Madison-Milton bridge. "The (Indiana) Department of Transportation has a lot of projects. This group would focus on these specific ones."

The commission's 14 members would be paid only for travel and other expenses. The group would be funded with about \$9,500 annually, according to a fiscal impact statement for the legislation.

It would not include members from Kentucky. But advocates said they expect a similar bill to be introduced in the Kentucky legislature.

The Louisville bridges project -- which includes new downtown and eastern Jefferson County river crossings and a redesigned Spaghetti Junction -- is expected to cost Kentucky \$2.9 billion and

Indiana about \$1.1 billion.

Indiana Gov. Mitch Daniels has said repeatedly that his state's share of the funding is secured, while the Kentucky legislature is still debating how to pay for its part.

Yesterday, supporters showed maps and drawings of the planned bridges to committee members. Although all the members voted for HB 1226, some did so with reservations.

Rep. Bill Davis, R-Portland, said he feared setting a precedent that all transportation projects need their own commissions.

"I hope we're not going to go down the path of exploding the size of INDOT (the Indiana Department of Transportation) and expanding the size of government for every project," Davis said.

But Kerry Stemler, a Build the Bridges coalition member and past chairman of One Southern Indiana, the area's chamber of commerce, said the oversight is necessary because the Louisville bridges project is so large and involves so many entities.

"It's the third-largest mega project in the country," said Kerry Stemler, a distant cousin of the lawmaker. "It's a national project. It means something to the entire nation."

Although much of the focus yesterday was on the Louisville spans, the commission would oversee the Indiana part of all Ohio River bridge projects, including a new Madison-Milton bridge. Kentucky and Indiana officials are working on plans to replace the current bridge, which was constructed in 1929 and has been rated "functionally obsolete" and "structurally deficient."

Kentucky has designated \$45 million in federal bridge replacement funds and Indiana has earmarked \$10 million from its highway revenue for the project.

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