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LOCAL

Communities Concerned, Criticize Proposed South County Connector

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A board shows a prospective route for the proposed South County Connector on display at a Trailnet meeting on May 8, 2013. (KMOX/Michael Calhoun)

MAPLEWOOD (KMOX) - St. Louis County is pressing forward with plans for a four-lane, divided roadway connecting mid and south-county, despite a growing chorus of South County Connector critics.

Maplewood's City Council earlier this month officially **came out against** the proposal and Great Rivers Greenway last week **expressed expensive concerns** about what's now being branded as a "boulevard."

David Wrone, spokesman for the St. Louis County Department of Highways and Traffic says

the county is undeterred.

"We are looking at this as a regional benefit. Maplewood is looking at it on more of a micro level," he told KMOX News. "If we required a hundred percent support nothing would get built, ever. We would be a grassy series of hills and plains."

It would cut through Maplewood and Shrewsbury the most.

AUDIO: Maplewood Assistant City Manager Anthony Traxler joins KMOX's Mark Reardon:

THE CONCERN



Reporting Michael Calhoun

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Maplewood’s letter to St. Louis County claimed that as many as 36 businesses in the Deer Creek Shopping Center and Big Bend Industrial Court would be displaced because of the South County Connector. The road would also wipe out a railroad bridge used by Union Pacific.

The lanes of traffic would ‘fly over’ the shopping center’s parking lot, which Maplewood says “would void all remaining leases which would kill the center,” which was just revitalized with a \$37 million investment, including tax increment financing.

Maplewood believes the county’s cost estimate of \$110 million is “woefully underestimated.”

Both Maplewood and Great Rivers Greenway are concerned with the road’s pedestrian and bike accommodations. Maplewood says the construction would “cripple” its 2009 Walkable/Bikeable Community Plan and foil efforts to win a Bike Friendly Community Award.

The letter: “We do not believe that the No Build option was properly vetted as an alternative and should be reconsidered on the basis that the same amount of funding put into bike a pedestrian improvements in the same footprint would accomplish the same goals of reducing traffic, promoting mass transit use, and improve safety.”

Great Rivers sent a note of its own to the highway department, saying the Connector could neutralize \$27 million in investments the organization has made to pedestrian and bike infrastructure on the River Des Peres Greenway and the Deer Creek Greenway.

“We would really like to see a connection that incorporates pedestrians, bicycles and motor vehicle use,” Susan Trautman, executive director of Great Rivers Greenway told KMOX. “The South County Connector could be a really great example of multimodal transportation where people can walk, ride their bikes, use their cars.”

But Wrone pours cold water on her comment.

“We want to provide a much need boulevard for cars and trucks,” he said, while also stressing that “bike ridership is important to us.

“But I want to say we are in the business of providing safe and efficient necessary motor vehicle driving pavement. We’re a highway department, not a bicycle department.”

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THE DEMAND

St. Louis County, according to the pair of letters, is using traffic data from 2005 and 2006 to justify building the road, while also acknowledging that it would cause bottlenecks on Hanley Rd. which don't currently exist.

Great Rivers suggests using more recent figures from the East-West Gateway Council of Governments, which demonstrates that St. Louisans are driving less. From 2007 through 2011, the data shows a 4.5 percent decrease in miles driven in St. Louis County.

Wrone responded that the roadway has been on the county's drawing board for at least two decades, and for good reason.

"Anybody who is not vested in this who has to drive from Clayton to south city on a daily basis would tell you that it is not a convenient or not an even remotely pleasant drive," he said.

Wrone said the South County Connector is a completely separate project than an I-170 southern extension, and would not alleviate pressure for extending the interstate.

County Executive Charlie Dooley, meantime, told KMOX News that the "highway" is necessary, for the same reasons.

"We know we can't use the 170 anymore, because that goes right into a parking lot, so that won't happen," he explained. "We still need alternative routes from Clayton to south county and this is the best we have to do."

The Connector would parallel the recently-completed, billion-dollar MetroLink light rail cross-county line.

"Just because you have one doesn't mean you don't need the other," Dooley said on that. "We need both. We need better highways, we need more light rail transportation. We need to do all the things."

During public comment periods, Maplewood notes that none of the proposed alternatives for routes garnered more than 10 percent support, which city leaders say is an indication of lack of popular support. Wrone said that interactions with citizens at hearings was overwhelmingly positive.

There is no funding secured and the plan is not yet final.

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Programming Note: St. Louis City alderman Scott Ogilve will join KMOX's Mark Reardon on Wednesday to discuss traffic impacts for residents along the River Des Peres and also how the roadway would pave over a portion of a St. Louis City park.

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Jay Dee • 14 days ago

The article says it all. The drive between South County and Clayton is unbearable. And, it needs to stay that way. We need to stop being enablers. If people want to conduct business and work in Clayton, they should live nearer Clayton. No one's tax dollars should be spent to enable someone to live that far from where they work. If they want to do that, one of the prices they should pay is a miserable commute. I'm not saying we have to discourage people from moving out from the city's core, but we certainly shouldn't encourage it and most definitely shouldn't fund it.

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McDonnell Dino • a month ago

This is nothing new but a different political approach. Municipalities south of the old Inter-belt now I-170 have been fighting the southward extension from the late 1960's. I wish reporters would do their homework and tell the full story.

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