

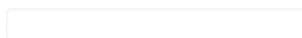
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# Residents question need for South County Connector

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A proposed St. Louis County road project has drawn concerns about its impact on neighborhoods in Maplewood, Webster Groves, Brentwood, Shrewsbury and St. Louis.

Called the South County Connector, the \$110 million, 1.5-mile road will start on South Hanley Road near Deer Creek Park and finish at Watson Road. It will be mostly four to six lanes and elevated in spots. The road will connect with Interstate 44.

The goal is to relieve congestion in this area, especially surface street traffic going to interstates 64 and 44.

About 100 residents attended a meeting hosted May 8 by Trailnet at the Shrewsbury City Center, 5200 Shrewsbury Ave. Trailnet is a non-profit group that emphasizes walking, bicycling and public transit as ways to improve health and improve communities.

“In the scheme of things, it’s not a massive project,” said St. Louis County District 5 Councilman Pat Dolan, who spoke at the meeting and lives in the area. “However, for us who live here, it’s a big deal.”

The acquisition of any property was not discussed at the meeting.

A drafted environmental impact statement on the project was released May 3 by the St. Louis County Department of Highways and Traffic, with the Missouri Department of Transportation and the Federal Highway Administration.

Residents generally took a negative attitude toward the connector.

Alice Hazel, 67, of Maplewood, believes commercial zoning should be changed on some of the area’s larger streets, making it easier for small businesses to open.

“Residents can walk to these stores without getting into their cars,” she said. “That can help relieve traffic.”

Several older residents said the project is being forced on them by St. Louis County. They also wondered about the connector’s effect on their home values.

However, Shrewsbury resident Kurt Stoepelman, 57, spoke in favorable terms.

“We’ve got so much traffic cutting through our neighborhood,” Stoeppelman said after the meeting. “I live on Lansdowne Avenue. The traffic comes from St. Louis and River des Peres Boulevard. At times, you can’t cross the street. I think if we have the connector, it can take away that traffic. Then, we can walk and bicycle. However, I also want to make sure the connector is done right.”

Trailnet officials admitted they had not had a chance to completely read the impact statement.

“We’ve hardly delved into this document,” planning manager Marielle Brown said. “It’s pretty massive. Our main thing is to inform the residents about the project and give them our concerns.”

Trailnet did not completely reject the South County Connector. The group’s speakers wanted to make sure the county thinks of other alternatives besides a new roadway.

“The question is: Are they thinking of 2050 or 1950?” Trailnet Executive Director Anne Mack said. “You just can’t keep building new roads all of the time.”

One speaker emphasized that public transportation and communities where businesses are within walking distances of residents’ homes are gaining favor, especially with college graduates, ages 25 to 34.

“We call them ‘The Young and the Restless,’ ” said Matthew Welti, an associate at Development Strategies, which is working on revitalization strategies in St. Louis and Kansas City.

“They value the energy of a mixed-use community with bicycle and walking trails and local businesses,” he said.

They also have good jobs that bring money into the area, Welti said.

Trailnet also has environmental concerns. One fear is the connector will discourage the use of MetroLink and the Great River Greenway, a regional walking and biking trail system.

St. Louis County has worked hard to make sure there will be a minimal impact to the neighborhoods, said John Hicks, a transportation development analyst with Highways and Traffic.

“We don’t want to split any neighborhoods,” Hicks said. “For the study, we’ve talked with mayors, elected officials, schools, businesses and neighborhood groups. The connector will improve traffic and provide better access to our MetroLink stations.”

The analyst said the connector is not a highway; it will be similar to the Forest Park Parkway.

The \$110 million cost is a preliminary estimate. The amount is fluid, depending on alignment and other issues, he said. There is no funding in place. It eventually will come from federal, Missouri and St. Louis County sources.

Highways and Traffic officials will host a meeting on the South County Connector from 4 to 8 p.m. Thursday, May 30, at the Shrewsbury City Center. Residents can look at display boards and talk with the South County Connector Study Team.

The county is seeking public commentary until mid-July. The impact statement then will be submitted for a stamp of approval called a Record of Decision by the Federal Highway Administration.

Then, the county has three years to come up with at least a design.

“At this stage, work could start in 10 years,” Hicks said.

Trailnet hosted the May 8 meeting to get its viewpoint across before the county’s May 30 meeting, Mack said.

To access the draft EIS, go to [www.southcountyconnector.com](http://www.southcountyconnector.com).

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