

# Delaware County moving forward on Big Walnut interchange project for I-71

Dean Narciso

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It's been five years since a survey was conducted indicating overwhelming support from residents, county officials and others for a new interchange along Interstate 71 north of Polaris Parkway.

At the time, officials touted how the connections between areas east and west of the interstate would ease traffic and improve safety and convenience for rapidly growing Delaware County.

This week, Delaware County Commissioners voted to approve funding for engineering work, a signal that they are committed to the project which has been stalled in part due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Commissioner Jeff Benton repeatedly mentioned economic development as a driver of the proposed \$66 million project during Monday's meeting, at one point citing "economic development in that area in particular" for the project.

On Wednesday, however, Commissioner Barb Lewis explained through a county spokesperson that "the primary intention to ease residential traffic congestion in the Big Walnut Road area has not changed. Moving that residential traffic from the existing Polaris and Sunbury interchanges would have a positive effect on economic development in those other areas. It is not intended to facilitate commercial or industrial development in the Big Walnut residential area."

### **I-71 in Delaware County: New interchange intended to ease congestion for residents**

The proposed Big Walnut interchange would provide interstate access for the fast-growing southern portions of the county, including Genoa and Orange townships.

Five years ago, Chris Bauserman, Delaware County engineer, said that unlike many new interchanges, Big Walnut would serve residential needs and not be built to spur economic development. Most of the land nearby is zoned residential and would remain that way. The northwest quadrant, surrounding Alum Creek Reservoir, is owned by the Army Corps of Engineers, he said.

"The residents in that area are employed mostly in the Columbus area and largely are commuters," he said five years ago. Rush-hour snarls along I-71, Routes 23 and 3 and Cleveland Avenue are common and illustrate the need for relief to "redistribute some of that traffic to a more-direct route into their neighborhoods."

Commissioners in 2015 agreed to spend \$700,000 on a year-long feasibility study for the interchange regardless of whether the project was built. The funds were reimbursed by the Ohio Department of Transportation.

Up to 80% of the project qualifies for Federal Highway Administration funding, bolstered by the Biden administration's passage this year of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act. The funding would pay up to \$32 million through the Ohio Department of Transportation.

Delaware County would be responsible for some of the balance, including local labor, cost overruns and contractor claims, according to county documents.

On Monday, commissioners Benton, Lewis and Gary Merrell unanimously approved spending up to \$208,279 to Burgess & Niple (80% to be reimbursed) for engineering studies and related planning. Asked by Merrell for his opinion on the project moving ahead, Rob Riley, the county's chief deputy engineer, replied "More optimistic than I was a couple of years ago."

### **Some Delaware County residents concerned over proposed I-71 interchange**

The interchange has intrigued residents who have been concerned that new or widened roads and ramps might cut closer to their property, much like in Columbus with interchanges every few miles. Fast-growing Orange and Genoa townships flank Interstate 71 in the area and would be most affected. The eventual extension of Lewis Center Road east from Route 23 toward Big Walnut Road would also need to be completed.

Lewis said in her statement that county officials remain excited about the project and its implications.

"We regard this project as one part of the overall goal of facilitating smart, purposeful growth in the county while also enhancing our residents' quality of life.

Officials in the city of Delaware continue to hope the project will bring significant traffic relief. The proposed interchange would lessen traffic snarls and provide better access to I-71 and U.S. 23, "moving some of that traffic out of our east side and downtown," said Lee Yoakum, Delaware city spokesman.

"The current 36/37 interchange is not sufficient to handle the additional growth of the city of Delaware and the county east and west of (the) existing interchange. Another east-west option between U.S. 23 and I-71 will address that," Yoakum said.

Scott Sanders, executive director of the Delaware County Regional Planning Commission, agreed, noting that "the intent has always been not to build up the area for commercial purposes."

"You could say that maybe we're hampered by congestion, which may deter businesses from locating here," he said.

Orange Township Trustee Lisa Knapp said she's heard from residents who feel a new interchange would hurt property values and create more traffic. She wants to hear details and see models before spending money.

"I feel like the county is using (the township) as a pass-through to get to the north," Knapp said, citing recent, unpopular road-widening projects. "It is destroying the natural beauty of the area."

"Interchanges are huge and it's going to increase the traffic down all of our roads," she said.

*dnarciso@dispatch.com*

*@DeanNarciso*