

Big Walnut Interchange years away

By **GARY BUDZAK**



At a recent Delaware Area Chamber of Commerce luncheon, an older gentleman asked county officials if the Big Walnut Interchange would be built in his lifetime.

One of the answers was, “How long do you plan on living?”

All joking aside, the Big Walnut Interchange was first considered in 1987 and has been the subject of studies and speculation ever since.

An unofficial website about project has emerged at bigwalnutinterchange.com. It describes the project as “Big Spend/No Gain” and asks people to “Voice Your Opposition” to the Delaware County Engineer’s Office (DCEO), the Delaware County Board of Commissioners, Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission, Ohio Department of Transportation, and the Genoa and Orange township trustees.

On Sept. 26, 2022, the commissioners approved a professional services agreement for preliminary engineering for the Big Walnut Interchange, as well as a project agreement with ODOT. The study began last November.

In subsequent presentations, DCEO told his townships, “A study is underway to see if the project is feasible. This should be complete by the end of 2023.”

The county engineer’s website (engineer.co.delaware.oh.us) has a page devoted to the Big Walnut Interchange project. It describes the project thusly: “The Big Walnut Interchange is a planned freeway interchange on Interstate 71 at mile marker 124, at or near Big Walnut Road in Orange Township, Delaware County, Ohio near Alum Creek State Park.”

The purpose of the interchange is said to improve regional access for southern Delaware County, as well as access to Alum Creek State Park for those outside the area. The preliminary cost estimate is \$98 million, including local road improvements for Africa, Big Walnut and Lewis Center roads, as well as a fourth lane to I-71 from Gemini Place to the proposed interchange.

The engineer’s website has a heading that reads, “What Remains to be Done.”

"If the traffic study update indicates that the project is technically feasible and can meet required traffic criteria set by ODOT and the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), ODOT and Delaware County will consider moving ahead with further study of the interchange and expand the analysis to include things like safety, traffic, noise, and environmental impacts," DCEO said. That further study would reveal if there were a preferred build alternative, and if there were, the county would work with ODOT to submit an Interchange Justification Study (IJS) to the FHWA.

Deputy Delaware County Engineering Director Robert Riley told the chamber audience that the FHWA won't approve the interchange unless justification can be proven.

If the IJS were to be approved, "DCEO has no definitive schedule for construction of the interchange, though we know that with the amount of work remaining, construction could not start sooner than 2024," the engineer's website said.

The project schedule at the bottom of the web page is more conservative, saying a final feasibility study would take place in 2024, and if the project were to advance the engineering would be in 2025, and property acquisition to be in 2026, with construction to be determined.