The South County Connector: Can we get a better return on investment?

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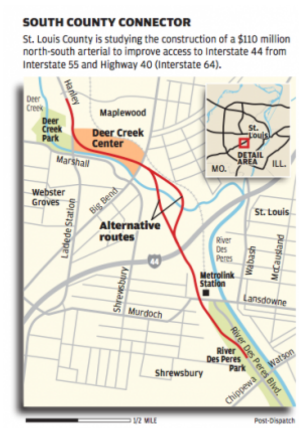

St. Louis County is studying the construction of a $110 million north-south arterial to improve access to Interstate 44 from Interstate 55 and Highway 40 (Interstate 64).

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The proposed South County Connector project has generated a great deal of controversy recently in the St. Louis region, and with good reason. Anytime a project involves spending $100 million in public dollars, it should cause people to pause and ask, "Are there better ways we could spend our money?" Several decades of experience indicate the answer is "yes."

The Connector is a sort of "highway light" version of a 50-year old scheme to extend Interstate 170 in metro St. Louis from Interstate 64, where it stops, to Interstate 44, thus completing the region's highway inner belt. And that's just the problem: In those ensuing 50 years, planners have learned there are better ways to leverage public expenditures to achieve a high return on investment.

Diminishing returns

Sure, infrastructure generally helps grow the economy. It speeds the flow of goods, capital, and ideas — the very foundations of commerce. The Romans understood this — their networks of roads and aqueducts helped make it the most powerful empire in the world. Much more recently, the development of the U.S. interstate highway system, which began in the 1950s, coincided with an age of great prosperity for our nation. However, once the basic network was built, we kept building more roads and have been receiving diminishing returns ever since. The time to rethink how we spend infrastructure dollars has clearly arrived.

With considerable highway networks already present in most of our cities, we cannot simply assume that adding more roads will always lead to substantially more economic activity — or that economic stagnation is assured if we do not. In the 1960s Jane Jacobs fought to keep further highway development out of Manhattan; it is hard to argue today that New York City's economy has suffered as a result.

In the 1990s the Atlanta region tried to build its way out of congestion at an unprecedented scale. The Atlanta Regional Commission added as many as 10 lanes (going in one

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direction!) to try to ease congestion, but this just induced more of the sprawling, low-density residential development that achieves the lowest return on investment. Analysis by Charles Marohn of Strong Towns looked at the life-cycle costs of building, maintaining, and replacing local infrastructure that supports low density housing. The conclusion: Housing developed at three to four units per acre simply does not pay for itself in terms of the tax revenues that it generates, and our regions cannot simply build their way out of congestion problems.

Thinking locally

The truth of the matter is that no two infrastructure investments are the same, because no two communities are the same. Some will prove to be wise investments; others will not. So what about those south-central St. Louis County communities through which the Connector would travel? Included is Webster Groves, a charming, historic community that was built at a moderate density, and has an appealing, walkable main street. Its property values have increased by 55 percent over the past 15 years — 20 percent more than the St. Louis County average. Nearby Maplewood has been a true shining star, with property values that have increased 75 percent over the same 15-year time period. These increases have coincided with a resurgent main street and the addition of a light rail line.

These communities are doing quite well without a new highway running through them. Or, more to the point, they are doing well because of this fact. Research shows that walkability and human-scale development increases property values, whether that involves a main street, a new town center, or transit-oriented development — none of which is part of the Connector proposal, which merely seeks to move cars a little faster.

Broadening the discussion

This raises the big question: if we could repurpose this $100 million, how might it be more wisely spent to achieve a better return on public investment? Investing in streets that are supportive of pedestrians and human-scaled land uses would almost certainly be better. The federal TIGER program is a step in the right direction in this regard. So too would a more efficient transit system that makes use of bus rapid transit (think of a bus that runs on-time and with fewer stops, like a train, but at a fraction of the cost of rail) — particularly at a time when a younger generation has increasingly positive attitudes toward public transportation.

What is needed is a more focused analysis of return on investment that looks at different types of infrastructure that could be built (e.g., ones that support walkable environments), the specific communities that are impacted, the types of modes that are supported (such as transit), and a comparative evaluation of whether dollars could be spent as part of a holistic strategy to create better access to economic opportunity.

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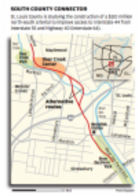
needed for better access



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