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Opposition builds to South County Connector proposal

July 17, 2013 6:15 am • By Ken Leiser kleiser@post-dispatch.com 314-340-8215

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The newly refurbished Deer Creek Center, photographed on Tuesday, July, 16, 2013. Photo by Christian Gooden, cgooden@post-dispatch.com

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MAPLEWOOD • The newly rejuvenated Deer Creek Center could become a casualty of St. Louis County's proposal to build a \$110 million thoroughfare extending from here southward to River Des Peres Boulevard in St. Louis.

But the shopping center wouldn't be the only potential loser if the four-lane road is built, foes of the so-called South County Connector warned Tuesday at a news conference in the Deer Creek Center parking lot.

"It will cause traffic to bypass our city and cause the loss of business and maybe even businesses," said Maplewood Councilman Barry Greenberg. "It will create a noise pollution problem. ... It will alter established traffic patterns and lengthen response time for police, fire and ambulance. And what for? Convenience for cars, commuters and casinos?"

Maplewood has gone on record opposing the connector project and has requested documents under Missouri's open-records law to find out what information St. Louis County relied upon to develop its environmental assessment of the north-south thoroughfare.

The city is not alone in its concerns. Joining Maplewood leaders at Tuesday's news conference were St. Louis Aldermanic President Lewis Reed and officials from Trailnet and the Missouri Coalition for the Environment.

Those groups contend that St. Louis County didn't consider alternatives to building a new road, and that the connector fails to address bicycle and pedestrian access to trails and public transportation.

St. Louis County is circulating an environmental study — one of the first requirements in getting a project off the ground.

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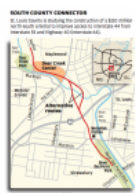
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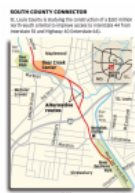
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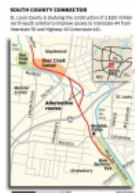
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The project would be built with a combination of federal and local funds. At this point, the county has neither, officials said Tuesday.

Garry Earls, St. Louis County's chief operating officer, said he envisions an artery similar to Forest Park Parkway, which links the city and the county. The South County Connector would improve accessibility for Interstates 55 and 44, and Highway 40 (Interstate 64).

During the 1990s, St. Louis County leaders abandoned the idea of pushing Interstate 170 south of Highway 40 after running into strong community opposition. The South County Connector, by contrast, would extend from Hanley Road at the Deer Creek Center to River Des Peres Boulevard near Watson Road.

The proposal calls for a four-way interchange at Interstate 44. Earls said there currently are no four-way interchanges on I-44 between Elm Avenue in Webster Groves and Hampton Avenue in St. Louis. At a four-way interchange, cars can get on and off the interstate from both directions.

The environmental study said the project could displace as many as eight families and 21 businesses.

Maplewood officials contend that the project could result in the elimination of four businesses at the Deer Creek Center in order to accommodate access points. The domino effect would void remaining tenant leases and potentially "kill the center," Maplewood Mayor James White wrote in a May 30 letter.

Right-of-way acquisitions would cost the city \$500,000 a year in lost revenue, White wrote. The project, he suggested, would "cripple the economic prosperity of the entire city, not simply close the dozens of businesses along its proposed route."

Earls said it is too early to talk about potential right-of-way acquisition and the implications for businesses along the suggested routes. Further, the draft environmental study does not contemplate taking businesses at Deer Creek Center, he said. The routes laid out in the study are only conceptual at this point.

"The objective of any county highway department is not only to not cause a detriment to businesses at Deer Creek Center but also to enhance them," Earls said.

The St. Louis Board of Aldermen has gone on record opposing the connector. In a unanimous resolution, the aldermen opposed the proposed route and the "legitimacy" of the environmental study.

Reed said Tuesday that the board was not included in the planning process.

"Take a look at what it does," Reed said. "Take a look at the fact that it runs squarely across parkland in the city, which violates the 2007 park protection act which would require a vote of the people to be able to sell or transfer park land for

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projects such as this.”

Earls said the county has had discussions with city staff members. “The interaction with the city government we had on this just didn’t make it to the Board of Aldermen level,” Earls said.

Meantime, those interested in weighing in on the environmental study have until Friday to put their concerns on the record. The most direct method is to go to the website southcountyconnector.com.

Nicholas J.C. Pistor of the Post-Dispatch contributed to this report.

Ken Leiser is the transportation writer at the Post-Dispatch. Read his [Along for the Ride](#) column online and every Sunday in the newspaper.

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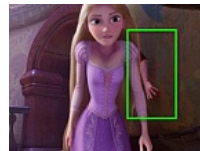
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