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Editorial: Disconnect the South County Connector

July 23, 2013 6:00 am • By the Editorial Board

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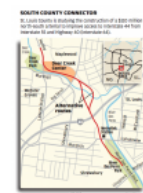
In early 1997, George R. "Buzz" Westfall, a Democrat who was then the St. Louis County executive, was faced with one of the more ticklish decisions of his political career. The question was whether to go forward with plans to extend Interstate 170, the Innerbelt, south from U.S. Highway 40 (now Interstate 64) to I-55.

As originally conceived, the Innerbelt was to connect I-270 in north St. Louis County with I-55 in the south. The middle portion, from Highway 40 to I-70, was completed first. Then the I-70 to I-270 link was opened. By 1997, Mr. Westfall's supporters in the development industry and trade unions were ready to move ahead with the \$600-million-plus third phase. They were Buzz's guys.

But nearly everyone else from Brentwood south to Bella Villa hated the idea. The project would have eaten up 325 residential and commercial properties and cut a wide gash through dozens of communities. It would have meant easier access to Clayton and the airport, but there was very little public support for the project.

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The South County Connector:

Nor, for that matter, was there any money to pay for it. Pushing it forward would have meant finding local gap funding until federal and state highway funds became available. So in March 1997, with an election coming up the following year, Mr. Westfall announced the plans would go back on the shelf.

Now they've come off the shelf. Sort of.

There's still no money and there's still lots of opposition. Charlie A. Dooley, who succeeded to the county executive's office upon Mr. Westfall's death in 2003, finds himself in precisely the same position as his predecessor. He's got an election next year. His supporters in the concrete lobby want to move ahead but there's considerable doubt that anyone else does.

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South County Connector is opportunity for transportation innovation



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This time around it's not an extension of a limited-access interstate highway that's being discussed but a far more modest two-mile [South County Connector](#). The roadway would have four traffic lanes and limited traffic signals. It would be akin to Forest Park Parkway.

A draft of an [environmental impact statement](#) was prepared by the county's Department of Highways and Traffic in cooperation with state and federal highway agencies. The public comment period on the statement closed on Friday.

The study offers two "build alternatives" and one "no build" alternative. Both of the "build" alternatives would run roughly from the Deer Creek shopping center in Maplewood across I-44 to River Des Peres Boulevard and Watson Road. They would alleviate traffic congestion on Hanley Road and in and around the I-44/Murdoch/Shrewsbury Road area. Both would substantially improve north-south traffic in the mid-county area.

Both build options would require knocking down eight commercial properties. One would take 19 residential properties and the other 21. Both would eliminate about six acres of park land. They would have limited impact on the endangered Indiana bat, so they've got that going for them.

The St. Louis Board of Aldermen has passed a resolution [opposing](#) the South County Connector. Trailnet, a bicycling and walking trails advocacy group is opposed. The city of Maplewood is opposed, saying the project would cost the city \$500,000 in lost tax revenue. Citizens for Modern Transit, a public transit advocacy group, is opposed, too. Parts of MetroLink's Cross-County route roughly parallel the planned South County Connector route.

Mark us down as opposed, too. Even assuming there was \$110 million sitting around, this project is far too expensive for the limited benefits it would offer. Compared to this idea, the project that Mr. Westfall shelved in 1997 was a bargain. At least it actually would have connected interstate highways.

Taxpayers already have invested \$626 million in the dubious proposition that getting from Shrewsbury to Clayton is a high regional priority. South County residents who are in a hurry can help amortize that cost by taking MetroLink.

Putting these plans back on the shelf shouldn't be a hard decision for Mr. Dooley.

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