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South County Connector project sparks diverse outcry

In [Region](#)

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The so-called [South County Connector](#) is years – if not decades – away from being built. It doesn't have funding and is for all intents and purposes simply an idea -- not a done deal.



But that isn't stopping a broad coalition from speaking out – loudly – against the proposal, which aims to ease longstanding connectivity problems between northern and southern St. Louis County.

The project – [which is going through an environmental impact study](#) that's required to be eligible for federal funding – is facing stiff opposition from municipal officials, some St. Louis County businesses and trail enthusiasts. Critics say that the project could harm Maplewood's economy, have a negative impact on trails and parkland and add more to a road-heavy region.

“Obviously there are many concerns,” said TrailNet CEO Ann Mack, [who noted that her organization put 10 arguments against the project on its website](#). “I often say there are so many concerns with this project that it's almost difficult to explain them all.”

But proponents see such benefits as reducing regional traffic on local roads, making it easier to get to the Shrewsbury Metro station and easing the commute between north and south St. Louis County.



Charlie Dooley

“We all recognize that the traffic didn’t go away because we ended it right there,” said St. Louis County Executive Charlie Dooley, referring to the decision not to build Interstate 170 southward from Eager Road. “The traffic is still there. We still need to do something about it. And just like anything else with federal money and long-term transportation, you’ve got to start now.”

With literally hundreds – if not thousands – of people providing feedback on the project, St. Louis County officials plan to wade through public comments and decide whether alter the plan. But the point person in the county’s transportation department says the project has plenty of potential.

“It’s going to help a lot of people,” said John Hicks of the St. Louis County Highways and Traffic Department. “I think a lot of the opposition is playing on people’s fears. And I can’t stop that or prevent that. I can only present the information that we have developed.”

Headed south

The origins of the South County Connector, Hicks and Dooley say, go back to the need for a north-south expressway in St. Louis County. That was initially the purpose of Interstate 170, which starts in Richmond Heights and extends to north St. Louis County.

Hicks said it was easier to build I-170 northward because the area was more open. Building the road southward, he said, ran into opposition – primarily because of industrial and residential centers. The MetroLink route that goes [from Clayton to Shrewsbury had been designed and promoted as a substitute for a south St. Louis County connector.](#)

But while I-170 didn’t extend southward, Hicks said, “There’s still a need to move traffic north and south.” He said the Missouri Department of Transportation and St. Louis County went through studies to figure out “how to address what is referred to as north-south connectivity.”

“Now one of the messages from those earlier studies and one of the main messages we’ve heard throughout this environmental impact statement is to protect our residential areas,” Hicks said. “So we looked at where you would have the least impact on those communities. That’s what led to the development of these alternatives.”



Brent Jones | St. Louis Beacon

The above map shows the general location of the build in the Environmental Impact Study. St. Louis County Executive Charlie Dooley emphasized "there is no particular route. There is no design route. It's just corridor."

[According to the department](#), the South County Connector would extend from Hanley Road in the vicinity of Flora Avenue to River Des Peres Boulevard at Watson Road. It would include an interchange at Interstate 44, which Hicks said the Missouri Department of Transportation had long wanted.

The project area, according to the department, is bounded by Manchester Road to the north, Hanley Road and Laclede Station Road to I-44 to the west, Murdoch Avenue and Watson Road to the South and Big Bend Boulevard and River Des Peres to the east. The municipalities include Maplewood, Webster Groves, Shrewsbury and St. Louis.

"There are very few crossing points through this central part of the county," Hicks said.

As the controversy over the South County Connector has flared, Hicks said he's heard numerous descriptions of the project. Many of the assumptions, he said, are incorrect.

"This has been portrayed as 141. It's been portrayed as an interstate. I've (heard) it would be a 15-lane highway," Hicks said. "It's not going to be any of those."

Rather, Hicks said the connector could be best described as a four-lane boulevard similar to the Harry Truman Parkway in the city. He said the speed limit would be 35 miles an hour – not 40 or 50 or 60 miles an hour that he heard during a meeting.

"This is not going to be a high-speed interstate highway," Hicks said. "It's going to provide a lot of local and regional benefits (and have) positive changes to traffic patterns in an area far broader than the actual corridor itself. And it's going to help a lot of people."

Making the case

Besides linking north and south county, Hicks sees other benefits to the South County Connector. These include:

St. Louis County Executive Charlie Dooley answers questions about the South County Connector after Tuesday's St. Louis County Council meeting.

Creating a new I-44 interchange: Hicks noted the long stretch of interstate between Elm Avenue in St. Louis County and Hampton Avenue in the city that lacks a full interchange. Hicks said, "That forces motorists ... to get off the interstate, use local roads in many cases to get to the next on ramp or wherever they want to go."

"We've got a lot of comments from people in the city of St. Louis who work in Clayton or work in Fenton," Hicks said. "This will certainly help their commute."

Reducing traffic on local roads: Hicks said motorists who are traveling north and south tend to use Murdoch Avenue, Landsdowne Avenue or Shrewsbury's local roads. The connector, he said, would take heavy traffic off local roads.

Some who live on Landsdowne have said that "they don't feel it's safe to have their children play in the front yard because traffic is so heavy," Hicks said. "A lot of residents on that street will actually park on the sidewalk because of traffic. That does not allow for a very walkable community or a very quiet community."

Ease the commute to Shrewsbury Metro: While Hicks said it's very easy to get to that station from the south, it's not as easy to get there from the west.

"If you (exit) the highway at Murdoch/Laclede's Station Road and then have to go through Shrewsbury through Murdoch Ave. and then ultimately make your way to the station, you would be five, six or seven

miles down the road on the interstate,” Hicks said. “So, a lot of people don’t do it as a matter of convenience.”

Hicks said having an I-44 interchange close to the station would create the possibility of Rapid Bus Transit to the Shrewsbury Station.

The proposal is going through what’s known as an Environment Impact Study, which is required by the National Environmental Policy Act for proposals that have significant impacts on the environment and that plan to use federal funds.

As of now, Hicks said he’s hoping the \$110 million project will receive federal, state and county funds. Dooley emphasized that the impact study is standard procedure for highway projects.

“We know we don’t have enough money to do it ourselves. We’ll need federal participation in this,” Dooley said. “If we don’t have an impact study, it stops everything.”

“It’s a fact-finding mission,” he added. “We have to have this information even before we even think about designing something and using federal money.”

Maplewood opposition

Thus far, the project has received plenty of feedback -- some intensely negative.

And while opponents have touched on a nearly endless list of concerns, some of the loudest opposition has come from Maplewood.



Jason Rosenbaum | St. Louis Beacon

St. Louis County Councilman Pat Dolan, D-Richmond Heights, came out against the South County Connector. At a press conference at the Deer Creek shopping center in Maplewood, Dolan said, "I don't want to see all of this beautiful area that Maplewood took the time and money and effort to put together" just taken away."

The city's [mayor and city council unanimously adopted a resolution against the connector](#). One reason was that it would cut through the parking lot of the re-established Deer Creek Center – which officials say cost tens of millions of dollars to build and now has tenants.

Putting the connector through the center’s parking lot, said Maplewood Chamber of Commerce executive director Jeanne Beck, would reduce parking. Taking away parking, she said, would void most of the leases within the shopping center.

Beck said the potential loss of 35 businesses between Deer Creek Center and the businesses operating out of Big Bend Boulevard Court “is significant.”

“There are the obvious implications, like the loss of tax revenue – which we estimate to be in the excess of \$500,000 both for the city of Maplewood and our school district,” Beck said.

Among other things, Maplewood City Councilman Barry Greenberg said the project “will cause traffic to bypass our city and cause a loss of business – and maybe even businesses.” He added that the city has “worked hard to be a destination and not just a waypoint on the road to someplace else.”

The connector, Greenberg said, will “create a noise pollution problem without any abatement plan – and no, we don’t want any ugly sound walls.

“It will alter established traffic patterns and lengthen response time for police, for fire and for ambulance. It’ll undermine the investment we’ve all made in the MetroLink and severely limit our access to bicycle and pedestrian paths,” Greenberg said.

Hicks said that logically the connector “would go through the parking lot,” adding “you’re not going to tear up the green space of Deer Creek for example.” But he also said it’s possible to change the plans to “lessen” the impact on the center.

“We have not seen the parking agreements that Maplewood refers to,” Hicks said. “We will work to develop the necessary parking. So again, it’s looking at how we can minimize the identified potential impacts as much as possible.”

Asked about whether the outcry in Maplewood was justified, Dooley said, “I think the fear is probably there, but it might be unfounded. Again, we won’t know that unless they say it to us.

“If there’s something about a project that you don’t like, this is the time to say it. ... So when we get ready to do this sometime down the road, we know what not to do as opposed to what to do,” Dooley said.

River Des Peres Park question

Another source of contention is the prospect that the connector would go through [River Des Peres Park in St. Louis](#).



Jason Rosenbaum | St. Louis Beacon

Alderman Scott Ogilvie, I-24th Ward, has been a fierce opponent of the South County Connector.

That worries NiNi Harris, [who helped write a book about parks around the St. Louis region](#). She was one of dozens of people who spoke earlier this month at [Southwest Baptist Church in St. Louis](#) against the

proposal.

Harris said the park was conceived in 1907 with the help of landscape architect George Kessler, who she noted designed the parks and boulevard system in Kansas City. She said the park has just gone through an extensive renovation including replanting landscaping, as well as adding pedestrian walks, gates, a bridge and ornamental light fixtures.

Because of River Des Peres Park's "snakelike" shape, she contended that adding lanes through it "will destroy it."

"What they're planning is taking the corner of it – the end of it – and then feeding all this traffic onto it," Harris said. "It will ultimately require it to have more lanes, which will destroy the park. This is a city park. It has been paid for by citizens for decades. And this is the end of 100 years of development."

The impact on River Des Peres Park was one of several reasons the Board of Aldermen passed a resolution earlier this month opposing ["the proposed route of the South County Connector and the legitimacy of the draft environmental impact statement, which fails to provide clear and accurate information regarding the impact the highway will have on the study area."](#)

Both St. Louis Alderman Scott Ogilvie, I-24th Ward, and Board of Aldermen President Lewis Reed say that a public vote would need to occur before the connector is built through park.

They point to passages in the city charter that say city property ["principally used or held out for use as a public park, shall not be sold, leased, given away or otherwise disposed of, and shall be used only as a public park."](#)

It also states "nor shall any structure be built in any such park to accommodate activities not customarily associated with park use or outdoor recreation, unless such sale, lease, disposal, gift or structure is approved by a majority of the qualified electors voting thereon."

"I think this requires a public vote," Ogilvie said, adding that eliminating "park space in St. Louis for a county road project" is a tough sell.



Francis Slay

Maggie Crane, a spokeswoman for St. Louis Mayor Francis Slay, said in an e-mail to the Beacon that Board of Public Service director Rich Bradley penned a letter to the parties involved expressing some of the city's concerns.

Start of update: Bradley's letter -- received by the Beacon on Thursday night -- [details 10 specific comments and questions about the proposal.](#)

In addition to questioning the project's impact on local trails and River Des Peres Park, Bradley wrote the \$110 million price tag "is a large cost for the anticipated improvement." He went on to say that the city and county have "major road and bridge improvement needs that will compete with this project for limited resources."

"We are concerned that this project may increase traffic congestion in City neighborhoods, with only incremental improvement for motorists, and will require resources needed to improve other existing infrastructure in both the City and the County," Bradley wrote. **(End of update.)**

“We understand that the county has a traffic problem that it would like to solve with the connector, but we want to make sure that it’s not at the expense of quality of life in the city,” Crane said.

Hicks said, “It hasn’t been determined if the public vote will be required because the River Des Peres Park will actually have a net increase in park land.” He said the project could remove roads within the park, which in turn could be converted into parkland or parking.

Philosophical divide

Beyond any individual issue, some opponents of the South County Connector – such as Ogilvie – see the project as a counterproductive expansion of roadways at the expense of bicycle infrastructure, trails and mass transit.

Opponents of the South County Connector held a press conference this week at Maplewood’s Deer Creek Center.

“You have people already driving less,” Ogilvie said. “You have fewer young people getting driver’s licenses. You’ve got cities elsewhere pursuing public transportation pretty aggressively. And how do we want to position ourselves as a region? Do we want to spend \$120 million to undermine \$700 million investment we made in MetroLink?”

Some opponents of the project – including Trailnet – pointed out that the project doesn’t include Great Rivers Greenway’s plan to connect the Deer Creek and River Des Peres Greenways. Critics say the project will “create barriers” for trail users.

Mack dubbed the proposal “the Pruitt-Igoe of roads,” a reference to St. Louis’ ill-fated public housing project.



Ann Mack

“It is ludicrous and insane,” Mack said. “And you have to ask yourself ‘what’s really going on?’ Are they not paying attention in the county executive’s office? That is not a connector. That is a dis-connector.”

Another concern arose over the project’s impact on trails and greenways. In June, Great Rivers Greenway executive director Susan Trautman [penned a lengthy letter listing the organization’s concerns about the](#)

[project](#). One in particular was “significant impacts to the River des Peres Greenway trail beginning near Landsdowne Avenue and continuing to Chippewa Street.”

Trautman also questioned the project’s impact on the Gateway bicycle plan and a proposal to build a “River Ring” of greenways throughout the region.

Hicks emphasized the connector “will not be destroying existing trails.”

“Those trails have to be improved, perhaps part of them may be relocated if there’s a safety concern or if there’s improved access,” Hicks said. But he said his department has been working with Great Rivers Greenway on how to maintain those trail connections “and we will continue to work with organizations such as them.”

He also said that reducing traffic on local streets could make it easier to accommodate bicyclists on local roads.

“Right now, the connector is working with Great Rivers Greenway to see how we can have good bicycle facilities on the connector,” Hicks said. “But also we want to make sure how we can make these east, west, north south connection better for bicycles on the local road and for pedestrians.”

In follow-up letter that was sent to Dooley earlier this month, Trautman said her group understands that St. Louis County supports the park and trail improvements to the River Des Peres and Deer Creek Greenways.

She added, among other things, that [“the county is willing to ensure that these improvements are incorporated into the design phase for the South County Connector.”](#)

The distant future

Friday is the [last day for public comment on the project](#). Hicks said, in addition to feedback from the general public, the project is being examined by state and federal agencies.

“All of their comments will have to be addressed in the document,” Hicks said. “Based on those comments, we will prepare a final document with the modifications and changes. And then ultimately, hopefully this fall, we hope to get a record of decision from the Federal Highway Administration as to whether or not we can proceed with this project.”

If the FHWA give its OK, Hicks said the next step would be to “aggressively” target federal funds. And getting federal funding, he said, could depend on whether Congress appropriates enough money for transportation.

Both Dooley and Crane said that it could be years – if not decades – before the project is built.

“This project is not funded, and if it ever gets built, we’re talking at least a decade away,” Crane said. “If it gets that far, there will be multiple steps throughout the process, on which the mayor would have influence. For example, the money would have to come through East-West Gateway as part of the approval process, in which case the mayor would have a vote.”

Dooley added that the “project could be 10, 15, 20 or 30 years down the road. ... at the end of the day ... we might not do anything.”

“We’re talking about \$110 million,” Dooley said. “That’s a lot of money. St. Louis County doesn’t have that money. The federal government doesn’t have that money right now. But we hope someday that it will.”

Ogilvie, though, said, “I am somewhat optimistic that this project can be a no-go. I think the more people learn about it and take a closer look, the less appealing it sounds to them.”