

Item #5:
Village President Underwood
Proposed IL Route 53 Extension

Lawlor proposes turning Route 53 corridor into greenway



Lake County Board Chairman Aaron Lawlor addresses a group of opponents to the proposed Route 53/120 extension during a Tuesday morning gathering at Prairie Crossing in Grayslake. (Emily Coleman / Lake County News-Sun)

By **Emily K. Coleman**

News-Sun

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The environmental groups and local officials that have long opposed the Route 53 extension are calling Lake County Board Chairman Aaron Lawlor's disavowal of the project the "final nail in the coffin" and are proposing a shift toward building a new transportation plan for the county.

The proposed Route 53 extension has all along been "unneeded, unaffordable and unfair," said Barbara Klipp, a Grayslake resident and executive director of the Midwest Sustainability Group, who used the nail/coffin analogy in calling Lawlor's move "bold and courageous."

"This highly controversial project will increase traffic congestion, increase our taxes in Lake County, waste taxpayers money and disrupt our quality of life," Klipp said. "It's not even a legitimate economic

development plan. It's a 1950s 'Field of Dreams' economic development plan in a 21st century economy that will create irreversible urban sprawl and destruction of the open space we hold so dear."

The show of support at Prairie Crossing in Grayslake came a day after Lawlor issued a lengthy statement saying he thinks a combination of likely litigation over the project, continuing legislative gridlock in Springfield and right-of-way still needing to be purchased means that the extension wouldn't happen on the timeline proposed by the Illinois Tollway Authority.

That would drive up the cost — estimated last year at between \$2.3 billion and \$2.65 billion in 2020 dollars — and lead the tollway authority to look for ways to trim costs, Lawlor said. He added that he's concerned the first things to go would be the environmental protections and other standards identified in a 2012 report authored by an advisory committee that Lawlor helped lead.

A spokesman for the Illinois Tollway Authority, which has budgeted \$5.8 million this year toward an estimated \$40 to \$50 million environmental impact study, declined to comment.

Tollway Board Chairman Bob Schillerstrom said in December that the study was a "good next step" in evaluating the feasibility of building the highway as a part of the Tollway system. Some local leaders that have expressed support for the study said they were surprised by Lawlor's move.

Lawlor said Tuesday that he has reached out to Gov. Bruce Rauner's office, asking him to block any hiring for the study and to direct transportation planning toward other proposals, such as keeping the land purchased by the state for the extension as a greenway, constructing a new trail for pedestrians and non-motorized vehicles and investing in existing transportation networks and transit offerings.

The governor's office also declined to comment.

The consensus that the tollway authority said was needed to move the project forward isn't there, Lawlor said, pointing to environmental groups and the village of Hawthorn Woods, which had long opposed the extension but had taken a wait-and-see attitude when the latest proposal took shape five years ago.

Leaders in Hawthorn Woods as well as Kildeer, Long Grove, Mundelein and Round Lake went public with concerns over the planning process last June, including the possibility of creating a regional planning authority to review development concepts within a one- or two-mile radius of the route's centerline.

The groups backing Lawlor hope that Lawlor's reversal on Route 53 means the end of the decades-long fixation on the extension of that highway.

Other transportation projects have been "held hostage" by "this delusional zombie road," former Long

Grove Village President Tony Dean, who has long opposed the extension, said at the Tuesday gathering.

"We know that we need road improvements desperately in this county," Lawlor said. "We know we need transit improvements desperately not just in this county but in this region. The question becomes as we refocus what is the best way to do that."

The focus should be on making the county a desirable place to live for young professionals so that when companies consider relocating they know the talent is there, said Karthik Chandramouli, a Mundelein resident and technology entrepreneur who also is a member of the environmental group Livable Lake County.

"The answer to our economic growth challenges isn't more suburban office parks, more strip malls, more roads, all of them islands that are disconnected from the surrounding communities," he said. "We all know that long-term economic growth is really something that's earned. It isn't a simple formula. It requires investment in kids and education, because we know companies pick their locations where they can get the best talent."

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Lake County Board chairman pulls support for Route 53 extension

By **Emily K. Coleman**
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A contentious plan to extend Route 53 north to Grayslake has lost a key supporter.

Lake County Board Chairman Aaron Lawlor issued a lengthy statement Monday saying he thinks "financial and political realities have become insurmountable" and would prevent the extension from happening in the environmental way envisioned in a 2012 report, which was put together by an advisory council made up of representatives from Lake County government and civic groups.

Plans to extend Route 53 beyond its current terminus at Lake Cook Road have been stalled for decades because of fierce local opposition that contends the project would become an expensive boondoggle that would ruin quality of life in Lake County's suburban and rural communities and destroy rare habitats and wetlands.

The rendition proposed in 2012, though, had earned more local support, including Lawlor's. The worry that has him pulling his support is that an escalating price tag would lead the Illinois Tollway Authority to look for ways to trim costs, and the environmental protections and other standards would be the first to go, he said.

The project is estimated to cost \$2.3 billion to \$2.65 billion in 2020, which is when the tollway authority has said it expects to complete an environmental impact study that was approved in December. The tollway authority has budgeted \$5.8 million this year toward the \$50 million the study is projected to cost.

With time needed to purchase the remaining right of way and litigation and legislative gridlock in Springfield likely, Lawlor doesn't see work actually starting in 2020, which means costs will rise on a project that already faces a \$1.9 billion funding gap, he said.

Illinois Tollway spokesman Dan Rozek said the agency would not comment on Lawlor's withdrawal of support, but Tollway Board Chairman Robert Schillerstrom said in December that the study was a "good next step" in evaluating the feasibility of building the highway as a part of the Tollway system.

Buffalo Grove Village President Beverly Sussman said she was "quite surprised" to hear Lawlor's

announcement, though she declined to speculate about what the loss of support could mean and said she wanted to speak with Lawlor directly and hear if he has alternative ideas.

Long Grove Village President Angie Underwood said Lawlor called her Monday morning about his change in direction.

"I was surprised ... It caught me off-guard," Underwood said.

Long Grove officials vehemently opposed earlier iterations of the extension. Underwood, who is in her first term as Village President, had said she would make speaking with Lawlor about Route 53 one of her first conversations and the village board passed a resolution in October to renew their opposition to the extension

Lawlor proposed in his statement that the data acquired and land purchased for the Route 53 extension could be used to "shape a new, balanced and sustainable vision for central Lake County" that transforms the corridor in a "21st century greenway" that balances economic development with sustainable and environmentally conscious planning.

Pioneer Press reporter Ronnie Wachter contributed to this report.

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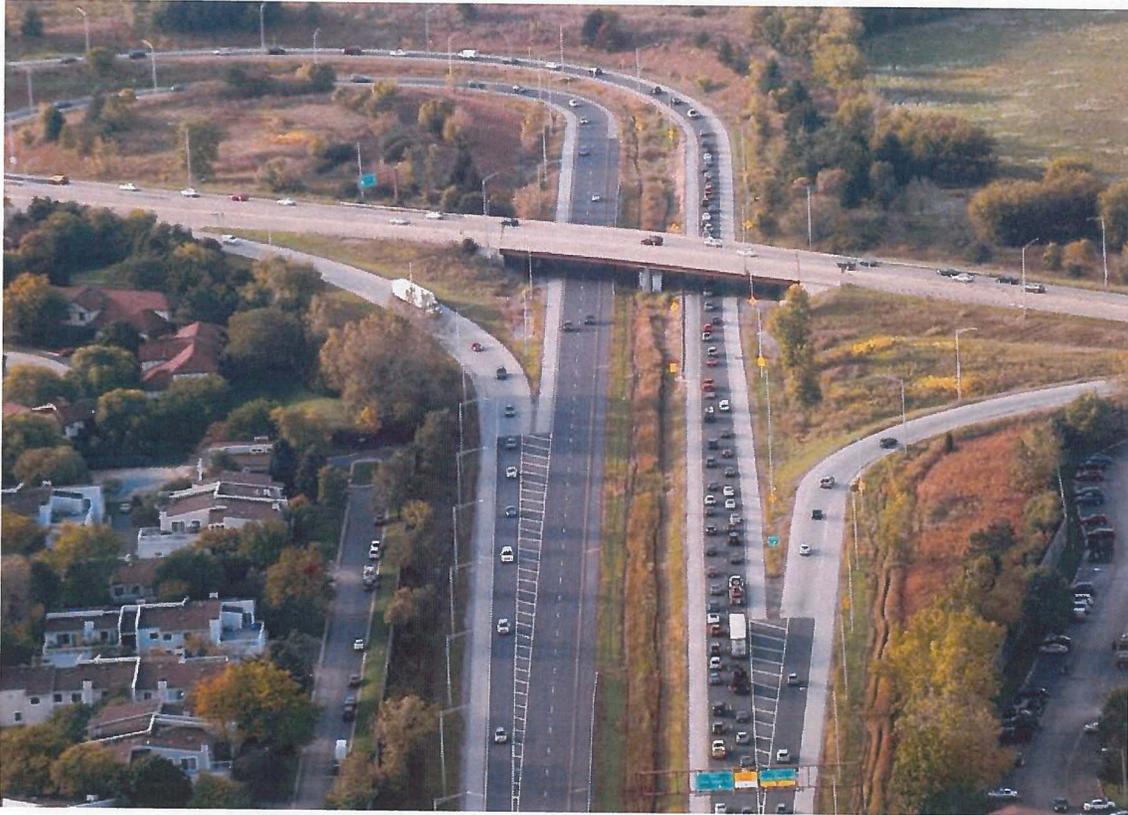
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Lake County | updated: 5/16/2016 6:41 PM

Lake County's Lawlor pulls Route 53 support; study still on?



Route 53 looking north at Lake-Cook Road. Lake County Board Chairman Aaron Lawlor says the proposed extension should be reassessed

Steve Lundy | Staff Photographer



Mick Zawislak



Marni Pyke

Monday's stunning announcement by Lake County Board Chairman Aaron Lawlor that he's withdrawing support for the Route 53 extension and suggesting instead officials concentrate on a "greenway" corridor leaves the Illinois tollway in the odd spot of championing a project dropped by a prime backer.

But despite the loss of Lawlor's support, the agency intends to proceed with a \$40 million to \$50 million

feasibility study of extending Route 53 north to Route 120.

Reactions were mixed as opponents applauded the change of heart but transportation advocates said it was premature.

Lawlor acknowledged the "time and energy" spent on the project. But a likely increase in a \$1.9 billion funding gap and ongoing political gridlock means the county's vision of a four-lane, 45 mph parkway north to near Grayslake would never materialize, he said.

Instead, Lawlor advocated investing in existing roads and creating a trail corridor through the center of the county.

"The financial and political realities have become insurmountable," he said.

Illinois State Toll Highway Authority board Chairman Bob Schillerstrom was undeterred, saying he expects to hire a firm to conduct an environmental impact study this year. The tollway has already allocated \$4 million for planning consultants since it began studying the extension in 2011.

"I am surprised by this (Lawlor's statement)," Schillerstrom said. "But many of the questions that Chairman Lawlor raised would be answered by an EIS. An EIS will take a look at everything. ... It will cast a wide net and take into consideration all the factors and opinions. To prejudge it runs counter to what an EIS is."

Long history

The project was intended to reduce traffic in Lake County and spur economic development, but it has been dogged by financing problems since its inception.

Under previous tollway leaders, a "blue-ribbon" panel of Lake County representatives took months to find consensus in 2012 on an environmentally sensitive road with features to prevent road salt, noise and lighting from disturbing wetlands and preserves along the route.

The design was estimated to cost \$2.3 billion to \$2.65 billion and faced a \$1.9 billion shortfall despite tolls of 20 cents a mile compared to the average 6 cents elsewhere. Likely litigation and "ongoing legislative gridlock in Springfield" would extend the four-year study timetable and increase the cost, Lawlor said.

Higher tolls, a new gas tax and a special taxing district in Lake County were supposed to subsidize the construction, but they have been politically unpopular. Tolling parts of Route 53 near Schaumburg was floated, but the idea was quickly dropped.

A new tollway administration was chosen by Gov. Bruce Rauner in 2015. Recently, leaders have said all options should be considered for the road, not just the parkway design. Rauner's office did not comment.

Lawlor said he didn't believe there was a chance for the project to move forward "when you layer in the need for the enhanced environmental standards, the schedule and the cost.

"As we evaluate all the work that needs to be done on transportation and all of the effort that has been put into the Route 53/120 project, it is difficult to take a step back and reassess the changing dynamics that we are faced with, including project timeline, increasing gridlock in Springfield and cost escalation," Lawlor said in a lengthy statement. While difficult, it is critical to make the decision before \$40 million to \$50 million is spent on

environmental studies, he said.

Lawlor said he was speaking on his own behalf. However, Lawlor co-chaired the blue ribbon group and his opinion carries considerable weight as tollway officials always have maintained that a consensus among the many communities and interests involved was needed before the project would advance. Opponents, including the villages of Hawthorn Woods and Long Grove, long have contended the road wasn't worth the price and potential environmental harm.

Not a 'waste of money'

Schillerstrom said the tollway board had independently evaluated the value of an environmental impact study before voting on it last fall.

"I wouldn't have voted 'yes' if I thought it was a waste of money," he said.

Such a study would determine if the road is or isn't needed and could also recommend the best type of road to be built, Schillerstrom said.

Lawlor said he expected the situation to evolve in the next few days and "my position is to work with the governor's office to stop the EIS process."

Steve Park, executive director of the Lake County Transportation Alliance, whose membership includes several businesses and communities, said Lawlor's change was "very disheartening and a big surprise."

Park, a former Gurnee village trustee, was the village representative in detailed discussions regarding finances and land use of the proposed road. He said an environmental study should proceed.

"The EIS is all about getting the best and most current information we can get," he said.

"You can't have a good quality of life in Lake County with the transportation congestion we have," Park said. "To think otherwise is to put your head in the sand."

Livable Lake County, a grass-roots group founded by the Sierra Club, supported Lawlor's stance.

"We are never going to get the affordable traffic solutions that Lake County needs as long as the tollway is bent on pursuing this boondoggle that will never be built. We are ready to stop fighting and unite behind solutions that strengthen our communities rather than divide them," the group said in a statement.

Former Waukegan mayor and tollway Director Bill Morris called Lawlor's move a "common-sense decision," adding that to pursue the environmental study would "be a terrible waste of public money and tolls to engage consultants to do study for a road that will not be built."

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Lake County updated: 5/17/2016 6:43 PM

Alternative vision for Route 53 extension nets enthusiastic support



Video: Shared vision to end extension



Mick Zawislak

Opponents of the proposed Route 53 north extension have enthusiastically endorsed what was described as a "bold and courageous" stance by Lake County Board Chairman Aaron Lawlor to close the books on the plan and transform the corridor into a nonmotorized greenway.

Activists were joined Tuesday by Lawlor and several Lake County Board members and other elected officials near Lake Leopold in the Prairie Crossing conservation community in Grayslake to support Lawlor's surprising announcement Monday to scrap the controversial plan because of cost and other factors.

"The reality is the Route 53 extension is never going to happen. The support for this project is collapsing like a house of cards," said Barbara Klipp, co-chairwoman of Livable Lake County, a grass-roots group with connections to the Sierra Club and other organizations.

Several speakers shared that view during a news conference near where the proposed extension would connect with Route 120.

Klipp said opponents always have maintained the proposed Route 53 extension, estimated to cost \$2.3 billion to \$2.65 billion, was "unneeded, unaffordable and unfair" and would create irreversible sprawl and destroy open space. She said environmental organizations were unified in opposition.

"We are for investments in projects that will reduce traffic, are affordable and can be done quickly," she said.

Klipp said supporters want the state-owned Route 53 corridor decommissioned and high-quality natural resources protected in perpetuity.

Tony Dean, a former Long Grove mayor and one-time chief of what is now the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, said the proposal has always been environmentally damaging.

"For more than 40 years, it has been a block on any real transportation improvements in Lake County," he said.

In his announcement, Lawlor suggested a "new course" for the corridor include a trail system and the opportunity for "balanced" economic developments.

Lawlor co-chaired a diverse blue-ribbon panel that in 2012 recommended proceeding with an environmentally sensitive road design envisioned as a national model. He had been a staunch supporter of a four-lane, 45 mph tollway to relieve traffic congestion and spark economic development. Extending Route 53 has been a controversial idea for more than 50 years.

"We always said this was our last, best chance," Lawlor said. "The key all along was the tollway stressed to me personally this project needed a consensus of community leaders."

Hawthorn Woods Mayor Joe Mancino said he told state and tollway officials the village was not going to drop its opposition.

"There truly is no consensus in the region, and this is something the tollway has always asked for," he said.

Lawlor said there was no specific action that caused the change of heart, but that it came after a series of recent conversations with Illinois State Toll Highway Authority officials and others. Lawlor said he thought the project would be delayed by legal action and other factors, causing the already daunting \$1.9 billion deficit for the project to increase.

Fearing environmental safeguards would be cut to save money and that political gridlock would handcuff needed state involvement in certain aspects of the project, Lawlor said he concluded the financial and political realities have become insurmountable. He has asked that the tollway not proceed with an environmental impact study that would take four years and cost \$40 million to \$50 million.

Tollway board Chairman Bob Schillerstrom said Monday he planned to proceed with the study. Lawlor said Tuesday he has not spoken with tollway officials but is going directly to Gov. Bruce Rauner's office to intervene by not allowing contracts to be finalized.