

Want surface streets upgraded

Residents fight state over expanding highway

By JACKIE KLEIN

A 20-year battle is still being waged over the need for the incomplete portion of the I-696 east-west freeway in southeastern Oakland County.

After two decades of study and controversy, the east-west segment of the expressway remains a concrete phantom in Southfield, Lathrup Village, Oak Park, Royal Oak, Pleasant Ridge, Huntington Woods and Ferndale.

Public opinion shows the majority of area residents favors completion of I-696, said Roger Smith, Southfield senior director of public services. Freeway fees, however, point to alternatives and claim federal money for the expressway will be rejected if it's not proven to be in the public interest.

Community Organization United to Preserve Our Neighborhoods (COUPON), a coalition of Oakland County residents opposed to the freeway, says Southfield officials aren't interested in learning about how alternatives to I-696 might benefit the city and taxpayers.

Under the withdrawal and substitution amendment to the Interstate Highway Act, Southfield qualifies for \$7.4 million in 1980 federal tax money for alternative transportation projects, said Peter Swallow, COUPON chairman.

SOUTHFIELD'S share of the cost of the freeway is \$1.1 million. The city stands to lose \$8.5 million this year if withdrawal and substitution isn't used, Swallow said. The money could be spent to improve regional highways and local roads to handle more traffic and for public transportation, Swallow said.

Southfield, said Smith, has maintained a long-standing official position that the freeway must be built because of heavy traffic on local roads.

"Questions have been raised and concern expressed about the future need for the freeway and the ability of local government to pay its share of I-696," Smith said. "It's been suggested that

the withdrawal and substitution process be initiated to replace the freeway with expanded east-west mile roads.

"With construction of I-696, east-west mile roads properly widened to four and five lanes will provide good local access and serve abutting businesses and neighborhoods without peak hour traffic jams. Without the freeway, the same roads would have to be further widened to handle through traffic."

Analysis shows that it would cost Southfield and Lathrup Village \$3.2 million to build the freeway and widen east-west roads, Smith said. Without the freeway, the cost would rise to \$5.2 million, he said.

NEIL GOLDSCHMIDT, secretary of transportation, said the long-delayed western leg of I-696 through southern Oakland County is "grossly overdesigned for projected traffic," Swallow said.

"The route was planned based on 1967 traffic counts and population projections," Swallow said. "But current studies indicate I-696 may no longer best serve citizens' transportation needs in an era of smaller cars, more costly fuel, reduced speeds and reduced traffic."

Smith disagrees. As Smith sees it, gasoline availability won't significantly reduce peak-hour traffic among affluent drivers. Most of the traffic is commuting to and from work, he said.

"I believe even if effective rapid public transportation were provided, relatively few peak-hour trips would be diverted from private autos," he said.

Swallow contends most elected officials are unaware of the substantial costs taxpayers must bear for the construction of I-696. The federal government pays 90 percent of the cost of interstate highway projects, he said.

Southfield with a population of more than 50,000, must assume 12.5 percent of the remaining 10 percent of the cost

of I-696 within its city limits, Swallow said. Only Southfield, Royal Oak and Oak Park are responsible for some of the construction costs in their communities, Swallow said. He estimates the current price tag for I-696 is \$320 million.

"Increasing highway costs to Southfield come at the same time gas tax revenues are sharply reduced," Swallow said. "The Oakland County Road Commission has delayed planned reconstruction of 10 Mile to five lanes from US-10 to Telegraph because of reduced revenues."

"COUPON'S PROPOSAL for withdrawal and substitution calls for reconstruction of 10 Mile, 11 Mile and 13 Mile in Southfield. Failure to act now will also jeopardize transportation funding in this area."

Mile roads, Smith said, can't be made large enough to handle peak-hour traffic as projected by the Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT). "The economic and social impact of acquiring the necessary rights-of-way would be tremendous," Smith said. "Suggested cross sections are unrealistic, and there's some question of whether projected peak-hour traffic

will actually occur. We assume MDOT's projections are twice too high."

"The roadway system without the freeway will operate poorly during many hours of the day because of heavy traffic loads. Existing developments will be lost. Some freeway opponents indicate such a scenario would be desirable and suggest withdrawal and substitution would avoid 'disruption the expressway would bring.'"

These claimed disruptions include construction problems, air and noise pollution, segregation of parts of small cities and the Jewish community and loss of tax base, Smith said.

Smith concedes there are liabilities to building I-696 but maintains they are outweighed by the benefits. There will be short-term inconveniences as there are in any other construction project, he said.

PEDESTRIAN PATHS in the Jewish community can be maintained during properly staged construction, Smith said. MDOT is dealing with the Jewish community's need for long-term pedestrian access, he said.

"The dilemma with the withdrawal and substitution process is that under current regulations, substitution money

if granted can be spent only on the federal aid system by respective governmental jurisdictions," Smith said. "It can only be spent on identified public transportation needs by the regional authority (SEMATA) approved by the regional planning agency (SEMCOG)."

"There's no specific requirement that the money be spent within the corridor of an abandoned freeway segment. Not all east-west mile roads in the corridor are on the federal aid system. Even if all east-west mile roads were reclassified as federal aid routes, the routes would only be eligible for consideration."

"There's no guarantee," Smith said. "In Oakland County, the cost of projects for federal aid already exceeds available federal dollars."

Smith said the city lacks sufficient funds and alternatives to abandon Southfield's long-standing support of the completion of I-696. But, he said, it's important that alternatives are considered.

"If withdrawal and substitution is the prudent path to follow, the region has more than three years to submit a proposal," Smith said. "More than six years are available for projects to be under contract."

"But for now, it's recommended I-696 be completed and not dropped because of monetary considerations and demands of a new pressure group."

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Alternative sought for lakeside road

By JUDITH BERNE

There's new movement afoot on Indian Trail.

Residents there apparently aren't giving up the battle for relief from traffic along the trail which separates their homes from the eastern shore of Orchard Lake.

Norman Scott, spokesman for Trail residents, asked the Orchard Lake City Council "to place a proscribed set of alternatives before the voters on a ballot based on an honest, correct and realistic dollar evaluation."

Scott said the recent 556 to 49 vote against a \$370,000 bonding proposal to upgrade and reroute the trail away from the lake "was not a mandate against relocation but against an added one-mill tax."

Scott said giving voters a choice of solutions for Indian Trail might have elicited a different result.

"The ultimate outcome didn't surprise me," he said. "If the ballot proposal was ill conceived, if I didn't have a vested interest, I would have voted against it, too."

In a letter to City Council, Scott urged that voters be given these alternatives from which to choose:

• Reconstruction of the existing road, which, he said, will cost Orchard Lake residents three mills over eight-10 years.

• Relocation as detailed in the defeated ballot question which is costed out at one mill for eight-10 years.

• Closing the road to all non-residents, which would require no tax levy, according to Scott.

SUCCESSFUL OPPONENTS of the rerouting also resented the lack of alternatives on the May ballot.

They said they opposed the question primarily because it would restrict their view of the scenic lake.

The rerouting proposal was presented to city voters in the May 19 presidential primary election as the least expensive of three alternatives studied by the council.

The council sees other solutions as:

- Increasing the present road width to 40 feet with complete repaving, curbing and drainage estimated at about \$560,000.

• A less expensive upgrading to a width of 35 feet is estimated at \$493,450.

Following the election, Orchard Lake Mayor Richard Groat predicted a November ballot question on upgrading and widening the road along its present route.

He said the overwhelming vote against rerouting the trail away from the lake showed clearly "that particular route is not acceptable to the community."

Scott rejected any upgrading the road as out of hand, saying "a wide major roadway along the lakeshore will destroy the bucolic beauty of our city."

If it goes through, he foresees "a total rezoning to commercial and the final destruction of scenic Indian Trail."

RELOCATION OF the road appears to have appealed most to Indian Trail homeowners who are after a permanent solution to the growing traffic on the three-fifths-mile-long trail.

Their commitment to donate backyard land and pay a total of \$225,000 in addition to the one-mill assessment is what kept the cost lower than the alternatives.

Heavy traffic interferes with privacy and safe use of their beach front property, they maintain. To slow traffic, many residents have placed obstacles along the roadside, in opposition to city ordinances. Curbs have been erected in front of two residences and city officials have designated them unsafe.

One resident has put up a "privacy screen" which violates the city's fence ordinance, according to officials.

Both the curbing and privacy screen issues have been taken to the courts for resolution.

A May 18 hearing on the curbs in front of the Scott and Charles Gadd homes was postponed to July pending the May 19 election. Meanwhile, a court order forbids extension of the curbs.

"The curbs have been in for one year. There have been no incidents, no damages," Scott reported. He said the curbs have been successful in slowing traffic when cars are coming from both directions.

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Church architecture examined by students

Farmington's historic architectural heritage is better documented thanks to the efforts of 25 architecture students from Lawrence Institute of Technology.

The students have spent several hundred hours preparing detailed measurement drawings and renderings of the mid-19th century Unitarian Universalist Church on Haitian.

The Church's board was presented with detailed pen-and-ink drawings

based on the students' measurements of all interior and exterior details.

This included a trip to the attic to document the building's moirise and tenn construction. Copies of the drawings also will go to the Farmington Public Library.

The church, a designated historic structure, is believed to be the state's oldest building in continuous service as a church.

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