

Journal News

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Interchange project has hurdles to clear

Financing issues must be resolved to meet June land swap deadline

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HAMILTON — Local transportation officials said Monday they should know by late June whether the Liberty Interchange project will become a reality.

The Butler County Transportation Improvement District Board of Trustees has until June 23 to complete due

diligence on the 57-acre Camp Timber Hill in Fairfield Township in order to decide whether it wants to buy the property for \$1.6 million. The former Girl Scout camp would then be traded for about 18 acres of Butler County MetroParks property near the interchange project.

MetroParks officials said the land would likely be rendered unsuitable for a park with all the road construction.

John Fonner, TID director, said Monday morning that he needs to be satisfied the

project, last estimated at around \$50 million, is doable before the trustees spend the money to purchase the campground needed for the land swap.

"The county and townships must agree upon the financing strategy and pledge revenues from the various sources prior to the (TID) board approval ...," Fonner wrote in a report to the board.

The Liberty Interchange project calls for a new interchange at Hamilton-Mason Road and Interstate 75, widening Hamilton-Mason and extending Cox Road to

the Green Crest Golf Course, if not all the way to Ohio 63.

Although the TID signed an agreement in late March with the local Girl Scouts Great River Council to purchase the camp, the property trade agreement between the TID and MetroParks has yet to be completed. District trustees gave Fonner the go-ahead Monday to finish that agreement. The swap must also get federal approval because of park lands laws, Fonner said.

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A complicated combination of public financing tools must also come together by late June. The project is expected to largely be funded by a Tax Increment Financing district approved by Butler County commissioners, but must be augmented by funding from other tax districts in West Chester and Liberty townships. County leaders have also suggested that as much as \$2 million in assessments be levied against landowners along the Cox Road extension corridor.

Whether or not the township districts can come together before early summer remains uncertain.

Officials said there is potential for using a TIF district in West Chester Township, but trustees have not approved money from the district for use in the interchange project. And although Liberty Township trustees rushed to approve residential TIF districts by the end of last year, they recently learned that no money will be generated by the districts until this fall at the earliest, township Administrator Dina Minneci said.

Furthermore, Minneci said work to establish an income tax district in Liberty Township with the help of the cities of Hamilton and Mason is still ongoing. She said a letter of intent to enter into an agreement with one or both of the cities should be ready

in the next few weeks. Township officials, however, have been working on the agreement since 2002, drawing criticism from other county leaders on the pace of progress.

During the TID meeting, Chairman Jim Blount remarked that the U.S. Constitution was written in four months, compared to the more than two years township officials have had to figure out the income tax district.

County leaders say it's important to solidify funding for the interchange project as a job creation engine. According to a study by the University of Cincinnati, the roadway improvements could generate thousands of jobs averaging yearly salaries of more than \$30,000.

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