

Oxford highway project moving

Ohio 73/U.S. 27
connector is on

By Janice Morse

Enquirer staff writer

HAMILTON – Officials are moving forward with plans for a multimillion-dollar, two-lane highway to connect a pair of busy, unsafe roads in the Oxford area.

Plans for a connector between Ohio 73 and U.S. 27 – the latter dubbed “the Highway to Heaven” because of its fatal traffic-crash rate – have been discussed for decades.

But just within the past couple of years, officials took the first tangible steps toward making the road a reality, David Efland, community development director for the city of Oxford, told the Butler County Transportation Improvement Board Monday.

“It looks like a real project these days,” John Fonner, the board’s executive director, said. Building the road would make travel easier for motorists in northwest Butler County and also could stimulate economic growth, Efland said.

Completion will take several more years, but important progress has been made, including persuading federal officials to set aside \$4 million for the project, Efland said. Local officials need to come up with matching funds of about \$644,000 – payable in installments – to secure the federal dollars. A total project cost is not yet available.

With no connector, motorists must drive through Oxford and the Miami campus.

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Because of heavy pedestrian traffic in those areas, posted speed limits are low, and travel can be slow.

“There are tens of thousands of class changes per year – and every time the classes change, students flood the streets,” Efland said. “That presents an opportunity for cars and pedestrians to hit each other – and the pedestrian always loses.”

Efland said the proposed connector would be important for handling the area’s projected population increase. A study by the Ohio-Kentucky-Indiana Regional Council of Governments shows that the population of Oxford and surrounding areas is expected to hit 125,000 by 2030 – a jump of al-

most 50,000 since 2000.

Officials from Oxford city and township are working together on the project, and might use Fonner’s office to manage it, Efland said.

So far, four steps have been completed – and finishing 10 more steps in the Ohio Department of Transportation process for major projects could take five to 10 years more, Efland said.

“We’ve probably overcome the hardest part: Bringing northwest Butler County together to agree on a transportation strategy for the region – after all, that took 40 years,” Efland said. “Now we need to find alignments, clear environmental hurdles and build a road.”

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REGION/STATE

Feds put up \$4M for U.S. 27-Ohio 73 link

Oxford asks regional board to oversee connector project

By **CHRIS DUMOND**
BUTLER COUNTY BUREAU

HAMILTON — After sitting on the shelf for more than a year, the U.S. Department of Transportation is shaking the dust off plans to build a connector road between U.S. 27 and Ohio 73 in Oxford.

Oxford Community Development Director David Efland told Butler County Transportation Improvement District trustees Monday that the federal government has appropriated \$4 million toward the project. Efland said the city would like the TID to manage the project.

"We like the TID," Efland said. "We like the multi-jurisdictional approach."

Indeed, the TID became more representative during the meeting by adding former Oxford Mayor Ken Bogard to its ranks, the first nonlegislator from west of the Great Miami River to sit on the board.

Plans for the connector road near Oxford are part of a larger project created as part of the Ohio-Kentucky-Indiana Council of Governments' Northwest Butler Transportation Study in 2003. Total project cost is more than \$93 million.

That plan calls for upgrades of key intersections along U.S.

27, Ohio 129, 732, 73 and 177. Because of the amount of wrecks at the Ohio 73, 177 intersection, \$500,000 of the appropriation will go to upgrades there, Efland said.

Other aspects of the study plan call for connector roads south of Oxford between U.S. 27 and Ohio 73 and between Ohio 732 and U.S. 27., and the widening and realignment of parts of U.S. 27.

"A major part of that study was aimed at taking some of the heavy truck traffic and heavy traffic away from the pedestrian-oriented parts of the

city near Miami University and up town," Oxford City Manager Jane Howington said.

Along with a roughly \$600,000 local contribution, the appropriation will be used for preliminary engineering and environmental studies for the connector routes, Howington said.

Although the project was downgraded as a funding priority last year by ODOT, Efland said he anticipates continued funding from the federal government. Officials weren't always so certain about the connector's viability, though.

Among other alternatives, the plan recommended by the OKI

committee was approved in a 15-14 vote in September 2003. Approval came after several public meetings in which hundreds of residents turned out to oppose the impact the road would have on both the environment and the rural character of that part of the county.

After last month's public hearings on Tax Increment Financing districts before the Butler

County Board of Commissioners, Three Valley Conservation Trust Executive Director Larry Frimerman said that opposition remains strong.

Bogard, who also

worked as the study committee's chairman, told the TID that complaints about possible environmental damage in construction of a road from Ohio 73 north to the other end of U.S. 27 was the reason a connector was suggested instead of a bypass.

"It was a politically sensitive decision to go just halfway," he said. "We'll let the fathers in 2050 or '60 deal with the other extension. Getting down to the environmental study is crucial, I think, to determine what environmentally sensitive rivers and lands and what type of things need to be done before you go around the entire distance."

But, in a meeting with city leaders Monday morning, Butler County Commissioner Michael Fox warned that using the federal money would further bog down the project.

"Once you take the first dollar, they own you," Fox said, referring to the federal and state government's environmental rules.

"If we can build the (U.S. 27-Ohio 73) connector without state or federal money, it will allow us to get the project done in the least amount of time, for the least cost and at the most benefit."

Ed Shelton, TID trustee and Hamilton councilman, said he was happy just to see the plan moving off the ground.

"The sentiments years ago were not as good from Oxford as they seem to be today," Shelton said. "Before, they would say, 'Leave us alone.'"

Jim Blount, chairman of the TID, also welcomed Bogard and participation in the project, saying it was the right direction for trustees.

"I think in northwestern Butler County, because of the population increase we're experiencing and the need to improve the roadways in high accident areas, the opportunity here is significant," Bogard said after the meeting. "And no one has represented this area since I've been here."

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MICHAEL FOX

Butler County Commissioner