

It's now or long wait for ramps

ODOT's schedule requires planners to finalize details of I-75/Ohio 129 interchange by September.

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Staff Writers

Officials hoping to embark on a \$50 million highway and road construction project in Liberty Twp. said Tuesday they must secure the funds, the land and finalize the plans for the project by September or be forced to postpone it another four years.

The Liberty Interchange project will create ramps between Hamilton-Mason Road and Interstate 75 and Ohio 129, providing a "front door" to Liberty Twp. and feeding the burgeoning development in its southeast corner. It is also expected to ease traffic congestion on nearby Tylersville Road.

But John Fonner, executive director of the Butler County Transportation Improvement District, said the interchange construction timeline overlaps with an Ohio Department of Transportation project to widen to four lanes each way I-75 from West Chester Twp. to Middletown. Construction for that is scheduled to begin next summer.

Fonner said ODOT will allow only one project at a time. That means the Liberty Interchange would have to be delayed until I-75 widening is done (2009) or sped up and made part of the widening project.

"We could marry our project to theirs, but it would change the speed of our plans," Fonner said.

Improvements to local roads, including Hamilton-Mason Road and Cox Road, were supposed to be the first phase of the Liberty Interchange.

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But to meet ODOT's summer 2007 start, the Liberty Interchange plans are hastily being reversed, bumping the interstate ramp improvements to the front.

Fonner said the township is working with property owners and hopes to have the right of way by the end of the year.

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Ramps

Liberty Twp. trying to create JEDD

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The primary source of funding for the interstate improvements is a special tax district in four nearby subdivisions. A portion of the residential property taxes in these subdivisions will be diverted to fund the project.

Liberty Twp. officials are working to get approval from property owners and businesses around the I-75/Ohio 129 interchange for a special income tax district, called a joint economic development district.

Liberty Twp. would establish an agreement with Middletown and Mason to collect an earnings tax from workers in the area around the Liberty Interchange development. A majority of business and property owners must sign on to the idea for it to take effect.

Liberty Twp. needs only eight more signatures from business owners to meet its goal of 51 percent. Township officials have given themselves until Friday to obtain the necessary support.

Liberty Twp. Administrator Dina Minneci said she is confident the JEDD will be approved. Even if it misses the Friday deadline, she said, the interchange project has a good chance of being picked up by ODOT.

"The JEDD will primarily help fund the auxiliary roads, developments and maintenance for the next 40 years," she said. "The JEDD will happen, it's just getting the final details on it."

Once the township has the necessary signatures, county commissioners have 30 days to approve the district or it will automatically go into effect. It could be established as early as October, Minneci said.

If Liberty Twp.'s funding is in place, a decision will be made in December by ODOT of whether to include the interchange upgrades into the I-75 widening project.

"We'll need to demonstrate to them the progress of our plans at that point," Fonner said.

To spur more support for the JEDD, last month the township brought in Cincinnati-based KMK Consulting Company at a cost not to exceed \$20,000. The company led a promotional effort to convince property and business owners.

The proposed development district is expected to generate between \$6 million and \$12 million during the next 16 years to fund infrastructure and other improvements. Overall, the Liberty Interchange project would cost around \$50 million, Fonner said.

Under the JEDD, business and property owners would be subject to a 1.5 percent "enterprise tax." Workers inside the district would also pay a 1.5 percent income tax.

The district is defined by Hamilton-Mason Road to the south, between Princeton and Millikin roads to the north, Yankee Road to the west and Butler-Warren Road to the east.

Tax revenue from the JEDD would be distributed with 78 percent going to Liberty Twp., 15 percent to Mason and 7 percent to Middletown, which will administer the tax.

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