

Liberty interchange hits new obstacle

By Jennifer Edwards
Enquirer staff writer

LIBERTY TWP. - The \$50 million plan to expand the interchange at Interstate 75 and Ohio 129 may have hit another snag.

At least three of the nine land owners with property involved in the project are resisting selling their land, said John Fonner, executive director of the Butler County Transportation Improvement District, which is overseeing the project.

If agreements aren't reached by early September, the project will be delayed two or four years, Fonner said. That's because the job would have to wait until after the state finishes widening I-75 from three to four lanes from just south of Tylersville Road to Ohio 122 in Middletown.

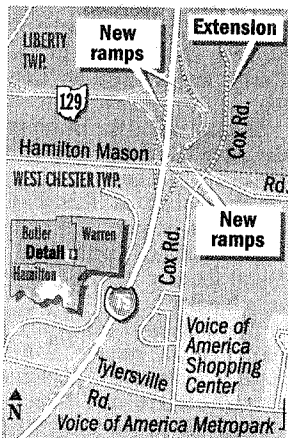
Some of the landowners, Fonner said, apparently think the interchange "is a done deal," so if I hold out I will be able to extract a higher value for my property.

"I don't begrudge anybody the value of their property," he continued, "But if we are unable to reach agreements with some of these folks at prices that we can afford, it is possible that this project may not happen. Our window is small. We have a lot of work to do."

State officials insist the township's interchange be built either at the same time as the widening project - by their contractor - or after their project has ended. The Ohio Department of Transportation plans to start construction on its \$120 million widening project in spring 2008.

Fonner declined to identify the resisting landowners. He also would not say exactly how much they are being offered per acre.

One landowner, Clark Em-



The Enquirer/Mike Nyerges

A long project

Butler County and Liberty Township leaders have been pushing for years to build an eastward extension of Ohio 129 at Interstate 75.

Currently, half of the interchange exists, connecting I-75 west to Hamilton. But the road does not continue on the east side of the highway.

The new interchange would add an eastbound exit from I-75 at Ohio 129, with ramps going onto Hamilton-Mason Road.

Plans also call for widening Hamilton-Mason Road from two to four lanes from Cincinnati-Dayton Road to Butler-Warren Road.

Cox Road would be extended to five lanes wide and run north to Ohio 63 in Monroe.

erson Henry, said Tuesday he recently turned down the TID's offer to buy six of his acres on the north side of Hamilton-Mason Road adjacent to southbound I-75.

The county, he said, offered \$1.2 million. His land is worth at least \$1.8 million, he said.

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"It's interstate frontage property," said Henry, 67, who rents out a house, pole barn and milk shed on the land.

"There are very few properties like it. After I started talking to some people, it should go for \$2.2 million. But I've offered to sell it for \$1.8 million and I'm going to stick to my guns."

In theory, the county could take the land via eminent domain. But that process probably would take too much time, Fonner said.

This potential delay comes just as Liberty Township officials cleared another hurdle: getting property and business owners in a 528-acre area to agree to a 1.5 percent earnings tax for people who work there. The money would help pay for the interchange.

Any long delays in the interchange project could add tax pressure to homeowners, township officials say.

That's because the township hopes the interchange will attract more businesses, which would reduce the need to rely on taxes from homeowners to pay for the rising costs of fire, police and other services.

"It's important that everybody realize that we all need to cooperate in order to get this done," said Liberty Township Trustee President Christine Matacic.

Butler County Commissioner Mike Fox said the property dispute reflects ongoing planning problems with the interchange.

"In a nutshell, it has been one mistake after another," Fox said.

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