

TID optimistic despite Liberty hurdles

Interchange moving ahead official says

By Chris Dumond
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HAMILTON — Despite the chance the Ohio General Assembly will outlawing its funding, a possible lack of interest from the private sector and a likely lawsuit from Cinergy, the Liberty Interchange official told Butler County Commissioners Monday.

The project, which drifts in

estimated cost from \$30 million to nearly \$50 million depending which parts of the plan officials include, would add an interchange to Interstate 75 at Hamilton-Mason Road.

Frequently compared to the Union Center Boulevard interchange in West Chester Township, county leaders often herald it as one of the important job-creation engines of the future.

While it is expected to spur the creation of thousands of high-paying jobs in Liberty Township, the road to financing a multimillion dollar interchange project entirely with

local money has been a bumpy one. "This project is going to be financed out of about five or six different pockets of money and the coordination, balance and timing of that funding is critical to the project," Butler County Transportation Improvement District Director John Romner told commissioners.

The bulk of the project is expected to be financed through commercial Tax Incentive Financing. Back-up funding, though, was to come from residential TIF districts now under fire in the state legislature. TIFs allow governments to divert

real estate tax revenues from new developments into road funds, usually to help infrastructure keep up with the growth.

However, a budget provision approved by the House of Representatives could castrate residential TIF districts like those in Liberty Township meant to raise money for the interchange, Romner said.

The issue is now before the state Senate. And, because the TIFs only generate money used to pay back bonds issued for road construction if the commercial and residential

development actually happens, there's risk involved, he said.

"The office market regionally is very soft," he said. "There has not been much new speculative or headquarters-type office development that has happened anywhere in the Cincinnati market area."

"There is a little bit happening now on a speculative basis on Union Centre Boulevard, which is good and bad. It may be taking up all the market that there is right now."

Retail, while booming to the

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south on Cox Road, is not sure to spread north, either, he added.

The TID staff is also in a disagreement with Cinergy over who will move utility lines when Hamilton-Mason Road is widened. Usually, the utility company would pay relocation costs if the lines are in a public right of way and need to be relocated for a public purpose like a road widening, Romner said. Cinergy is not recognizing the TID project as such a purpose and that the matter could end up in court.

A Cinergy spokeswoman said she had insufficient information about the matter to answer questions

late Monday.

Despite the cloud over his head, Romner remained optimistic about the project. He said the Cox Road extension and widening of Hamilton-Mason Road east of I-75 could go out for construction bids late this year if all goes well.

Commissioner Michael Fox also was hopeful. Fox said deals could be made with private developers to meet financing shortfalls. The Children's Hospital satellite campus planned near the proposed interchange also is a good sign, he said.

"Knowing that the hospital is coming ... I believe that's going to be a magnet," he said. "There's going to be some early adopters, as there always are. And, as we found with Union Centre, once they start to see the dirt move, that ramps up the level of interest."

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