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Let's grow Innerbelt, not nuke it

The only thing wrong with the Akron Innerbelt is that half of us can't use it.

If you're eastbound on the Expressway, you can sail right downtown. If you're westbound, you don't exist.

Well, sure, technically you can get onto the Innerbelt, but only by exiting at Dart Avenue and fighting your way through four traffic lights.

The decision to box out half of the potential customers was made in the early 1980s. The chief problem was not the usual culprit -- a lack of money. Although Akron struggled mightily to find the funding to complete the Innerbelt -- also known as state Route 59 and the Martin Luther King Jr. Freeway -- an off-ramp from Interstate 76 West wasn't added because it was too close to the on-ramp from High Street.

At least that's the recollection of retired Akron traffic engineer Bryon Sturm.

Sturm should know. For more than four decades, he held a variety of planning/engineering jobs in the Akron area. As technical director of the transportation bureau for the city, he actually drew the first Innerbelt sketches.

``It was just too close (to the High Street on-ramp) to get the proper movements without all the weaves," Sturm says.

Factor in the ridiculous weave between the Broadway off-ramp and the Wolf Ledges on-ramp, he says, and the concept was dismissed in the earliest engineering stages.

The Akron Expressway ``was designed in the late '40s and built in the early '50s," he notes. ``At the time, everybody thought that the more interchanges you have, the better off you are. And therefore, everybody had one at their front door. We found that wasn't necessarily the safest way to go."

But now we have a chance to fix things.

In five years, the Ohio Department of Transportation will launch a \$550 million project to clean up I-76 from the Central Interchange all the way to the county line.

Four preliminary designs have been drawn. Two of them would give the Innerbelt a full interchange by eliminating one or both of the nearby on-ramps.

This is particularly noteworthy in view of the fact that Akron Mayor Don Plusquellic has wanted to tear up the under-used Innerbelt for years. He reiterated that desire last week while announcing plans to create a biomedical business district.

Creating the zone is not dependent on tearing up the last mile of the Innerbelt and replacing it with a six-lane boulevard (read: stoplights). But he'd love to.

Never mind that we have invested \$65 million in building the Innerbelt.

Never mind that it is the only freeway that gets us right into the heart of the city.

Never mind that the upcoming revamp of I-76 is the perfect time to cash in on the Innerbelt's promise.

It's easy to understand the mayor's lust for additional acreage near the downtown. But ripping up something that hasn't been allowed to reach its potential isn't the way to do it.

The Innerbelt makes as much sense today as it did when it was first drawn up in 1960. It still leads directly to the heart of town and the city's biggest employment center -- Cascade.

Most cities struggle to find a way to punch through a new freeway. We have the luxury of being able to nurture one.

Engineer Sturm, who still lives in Akron, goes to great lengths to say he's out of the loop after five years of retirement and hasn't even looked at the ODOT plans. But he is highly intrigued by the idea of finally getting the south end of the Innerbelt to carry its own weight.

(If you want to see the plans, head to: <http://centralinterchange.org/alternatives1.html>)

What about the other end of MLK? Well, the original plan, which would have pushed it directly to state Route 8, was a bridge designer's ultimate fantasy. But that's a topic for another day.

That day is next Friday. Hope to see you then.

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