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Big changes to Innerbelt worth a look

In 1960, when Akron traffic planner Byron Sturm put pencil to paper and began to sketch the Akron Innerbelt, John Dziurlaj was T-minus 26 years and counting.

But Dziurlaj may well be Sturm's biggest fan.

Dziurlaj (pronounced JER-lye), a senior at the University of Akron, is co-founder of the Innerbelt Integration Initiative, a group whose goal is to preserve and expand the Akron Innerbelt.

Suffice it to say that Akron Mayor Don Plusquellic has not invited him to tea.

For the second time in recent years, Plusquellic has floated a plan to shrink a big part of the Innerbelt, this time to help create a biomedical business corridor linking Akron's hospitals.

The mayor says too few drivers use the freeway to justify the acreage it covers. He wants to tear up the one-mile stretch between Cedar and Howard streets and substitute a six-lane boulevard. And he doesn't want to pay the millions of dollars that will soon be required to replace the decks of the bridges that cross it.

By contrast, Dziurlaj thinks the only thing wrong with Sturm's plan was that it was never finished. And he thinks it's as viable as ever.

``The Innerbelt was specifically designed to relieve congestion at the central interchange," Dziurlaj says. ``The mayor cannot judge the utility of a partially completed freeway any more than a critic can judge an unfinished work of art."

Why on earth would a 20-year-old computer science major have such an abiding interest in an ancient project?

``I was always very interested in roads," Dziurlaj says. ``When I first got my driver's license, I said to myself, `I'm going to find a new way back every time I go somewhere.' "

On one of those trips, he began to wonder about the big freeway on the west side of downtown Akron that seemed to be incredibly underutilized.

Gradually he turned his Innerbelt curiosity into somewhat of an obsession, prowling through the archives at UA, city hall and engineering firms.

Original design

The original design was a whopper. Instead of stopping at Howard on the north end of downtown, it would have continued across the valley, hooked up directly with state Route 8, then later headed east and gone all the way to Kent over the path now occupied by state Route 59.

The link from Howard to Route 8 would have looked like something out of *The Jetsons*.

``That would have been a bridge designer's dream," recalls engineer Sturm, who was a member of a 1963 committee that urged its construction.

An entire interchange was to have been built up in the air, all connected by enormous high-level bridges.

Sturm's fan, Dziurlaj, thinks that's still feasible.

Not a chance. While that would be a lovely development for drivers, the price tag would be ghastly. In 1960, the best guess was \$250 million. In today's dollars, that's \$1.7 billion.

And money is just part of the problem. The original plans took a huge hit in the 1970s with the passage of the federal Environmental Protection Act.

“By the time you got done with the bridges,” says Sturm, “you don’t have much left of the valley. With the rivers and the wetlands and the park, you get into all kinds of complications.”

So that boat seems to have sailed. But what about converting Perkins Street to a limited-access road and hooking up with Route 8 that way?

You couldn’t free the entire ¾-mile stretch of traffic lights because of heavy cross-traffic to and from the All-America Bridge. And we’re probably locked into two more stoplights at the other end of Perkins that were just installed as part of the \$43 million Route 8 remake.

But you could certainly streamline that stretch. Close all the other cross streets, and drivers would be a lot more inclined to use Perkins to get from Route 8 to downtown and vice versa.

Low-cost solution

“We kind of thought the same thing,” says Jason Segedy of the Akron Metropolitan Area Transportation Study, the group that analyzes local projects for the Ohio Department of Transportation. “That is a very low-cost solution. With a little bit of signal coordination and maybe eliminating a light or two, you do get to where it’s a pretty high-speed corridor.”

On the south end of the Innerbelt, the solution is a little more complicated. But not much.

In 2011, ODOT will begin a \$550 million project to clean up the expressway from the central interchange west to the county line. Officials haven’t decided exactly how to do it yet, but four preliminary drawings have been made -- and two of them would finally connect the westbound expressway with the Innerbelt.

That would increase Innerbelt traffic by an estimated 12,000 cars a day.

Moreover, this seems like a particularly bad time to tear the thing up. Why cut off easy access to the north end of downtown with the big Northside Lofts project going up and, in theory, spurring all kinds of redevelopment there?

Plusquellic says people who want to live in the heart of a city aren’t the kind who want to get into and out of it quickly.

He also emphasizes that creating a thriving city involves far more than smooth transportation: “You are absolutely wrong (to assume that) getting from Point A to Point B makes a good city. That’s the biggest hogwash.”

Engineer Sturm, who retired five years ago, is a close Plusquellic ally and sees merit in reclaiming some of the land that is now covered by Innerbelt concrete. But he is also intrigued by the idea of completing the Innerbelt interchange.

“If you close the Main Street interchange and the Wolf Ledges interchange, maybe you could get the connection from the east to the Innerbelt. That would cause traffic to enter downtown on Cedar and Exchange. Cedar and Exchange would be a major piece of business.

“Wow. That would be an interesting thought.”

Sure would. So let’s think it fast -- before ODOT’s plans for 2011 are set in stone.

Current proposal

At this point, ODOT favors a plan that would *not* connect the expressway to the Innerbelt but instead would close WolfLedges/Grant and rework Broadway/Main. The city will have huge input into the design, but the final decision will rest with ODOT.

Segedy, the AMATS planner, says he hopes ODOT “keeps an open mind about connecting it from the other direction.” He calls this decision “a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity” to get it right.

Segedy also says that kneecapping the Innerbelt would create a gargantuan intersection where the new boulevard would cross Market Street -- the biggest intersection in the region.

“The Innerbelt doesn’t sound like a lot of traffic (34,000 cars a day) until you put it all on a normal road.”

Plusquellic says those two streets don’t necessarily have to intersect. But that sounds like a lot of additional money to make them do something else.

The good news is that the mayor is not necessarily opposed to hooking up the westbound expressway to the Innerbelt. He says he needs to study it more closely.

There's plenty to study.

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