

Resolve in Place, Kentucky Funding Not for Ohio River Bridges

Whether the Louisville-Jefferson County, KY-IN Metropolitan Statistical Area (which includes the Indiana counties of Clark, Floyd, Harrison and Washington) can maintain its status as one of the state's fastest growing regions depends, in part, on long-awaited transportation improvements.

Highly efficient traffic flow is not a luxury, but rather a necessity, as regions compete for business investment and jobs. The Louisville/Southern Indiana region has been seeking to improve its transportation infrastructure for nearly 50 years.

The Ohio River Bridges Project calls for two new bridges and the rebuild of Spaghetti Junction – a major interchange where Interstate 64, I-65 and I-71 meet in downtown Louisville. The multi-decade project is to be funded by both states with Kentucky picking up roughly two-thirds of the cost – now estimated at nearly \$4 billion. This figure is higher than previous cost estimates to reflect price increases in raw materials and a planned six-year extension of the project for the Spaghetti Junction phase.

BizVoice® last reported on this evolving project in the March/April 2005 issue. Significant progress has been made, but most aspects are still in the planning and approval stages.



An environmental impact study has been completed and a funding plan, created by both states, was scheduled for submission to the Federal Highway Administration in June. It is still uncertain when the contents of this report will be available for public review. Differences of opinion abound regarding what benchmarks should be met before the project proceeds, but its importance and magnitude is seldom a dispute.

“It’s not only important to Indiana and Kentucky but to the entire region,” asserts Kerry Stemler, chairman of One Southern Indiana – a regional economic development group and leading advocate for the project’s rapid completion. “The community as a whole, on both sides of the river, is working

together like never before.”

A group of business and community leaders, known as the Bridges Project Coalition, has come together to advocate for the construction and help move the project along in a timely manner.

“We’re on track where we are today, but we can’t afford to fall down,” Stemler assures. “We can’t lose a day, and anything we can do to gain a day is helpful.”

The scope of the task and the number of governing bodies (local, state and federal) involved creates numerous potential hurdles. Civil engineers and economic development officials agree that all, not just part, of the project must be completed to provide the traffic solution they envision.

“This is a totally comprehensive project; I can’t stress that enough. One part doesn’t work without the others,” Stemler warns.

Show me the money

Funding is a challenge that will remain throughout the expected completion date of 2024. Paul Boone is the Indiana Department of Transportation’s project manager for the bridges plan.

“Kentucky is following a legislative process for funding,” Boone reports. He goes on to explain that Kentucky’s more traditional funding process will require continuous budget allocations from the state’s General Assembly throughout the lengthy construction phase. Indiana, on the other hand, has money in the bank from Gov. Daniels’ Major Moves initiative to lease the state toll road for \$3.8 billion. “Without Major Moves, we (Indiana) would not have funding for the project,” Boone reveals.

Incremental funding, subject to changing priorities, is obviously less reliable than cash on hand. Kentucky’s current ability to fund another Ohio River bridge farther east – from Madison, Indiana to Milton, Kentucky – has been questioned as well.

Despite these unknowns, many in the region are confident the project will proceed. One of them is Carmon Hickerson, vice president of public affairs and communications for Greater Louisville Inc., (the metro area’s chamber of commerce). “It’s definitely going to happen. It has to happen, and it will be good for not only Louisville and Southern Indiana but the surrounding regions as well,” she asserts.

In a fitting tribute to the success of Major Moves, Hickerson reports that Kentucky’s General Assembly has asked the state to consider alternative funding options, including privatization.

To view the March/April 2005 *BizVoice*® article on the Ohio River Bridges Project, go to the archives section of www.bizvoicemagazine.com



March/April 2005

Story by Jonathan Wales