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Ky., Ind. panel recommends bi-state bridges oversight

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A group of Kentucky and Indiana negotiators on Tuesday unanimously recommended the creation of an interstate authority to oversee the financing, construction and operations of the Ohio River Bridges Project.

But neither state is able to say when that authority will be in place and start working on how to pay for the \$4.1 billion plan, which is years behind schedule and lacks a clear funding strategy.

Chad Carlton, a spokesman for Louisville Mayor Jerry Abramson, said the mayor and Kentucky Gov. Steve Beshear could make their appointments to the authority in the next few weeks.

"We don't have a definite date set, but we want it to move sooner rather than later," Beshear spokesman Jay Blanton said.

Indiana Gov. Mitch Daniels has not set a date for naming his state's seven members, said Scott Stewart, the governor's senior policy director.

The bi-state authority will be made up of seven representatives each from Indiana and Kentucky. Four of Kentucky's members will be appointed by Abramson and three by Beshear.

The next step, Blanton said, is for Beshear to name a statewide panel that will oversee large transportation projects as mandated by legislation approved by the Kentucky General Assembly in June. That's expected to happen in the next two to three weeks, after which time the governor will appoint Kentucky's members to the interstate authority, Blanton said.

The statewide panel must hold its first meeting by Nov. 1, according to state law.

Tuesday's 40-minute meeting of the negotiators at the Kentucky International Convention Center was the latest action by local officials to kick-start the stalled project since the General Assembly approved the legislation in June that laid out how the state would establish a bi-state group to work with Indiana. The project includes two new bridges between Louisville and Clark County, Ind., and a reworked Spaghetti Junction interchange.

In July, the Louisville Metro Council passed a resolution that cleared the way for the creation of the negotiating teams by requesting that Abramson and Beshear appoint the negotiators.

The council also requested that the bi-state authority hold four public hearings in Louisville before it proposes a financing plan for the bridges project.

The project, approved by the federal government in 2003, has languished amid cost increases and debate in Kentucky's legislature over spending the state's share of federal transportation money on construction of the bridges and other mega transportation projects.

David Nicklies, a Louisville real estate developer and member of Kentucky's negotiating team, noted that hundreds of meetings have been held on the project. "Now it's time to get on with it," he said.

The 10-person group of negotiators, made up of state and local officials and civic and business leaders, also took public comments on Tuesday. Several people spoke, including those who support and those who oppose parts of the project.

Charles Buddeke, a member of the Bridges Coalition, said the region's job base cannot grow "without this safe, reliable bridge and connecting highway network the bridges project will provide."

Jim Urban, director of planning and development for Jeffersonville, Ind., said Southern Indiana officials meet regularly with Abramson and supporters of the project. "That group of people and the community at large are still very much in support of this project," Urban said.

Robert Griffith, an attorney for River Fields, which opposes a bridge in eastern Jefferson County, told the panel his organization hopes the bi-state authority will work on a "real" financial plan.

"River Fields thinks it's very important that there be a realistic financial plan for the project in order for everybody to understand how this will really work," he said.

Kenya McGruder, president of the Louisville Urban League's young professionals group, implored leaders from both states to get the project moving again, citing the jobs the project would bring.

"It's time for it to move forward. It's time to stop talking about it," she said.

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