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Bill creating toll authorities for transportation projects clears House

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FRANKFORT, Ky. — A measure creating statewide and local toll authorities to pay for the Ohio River Bridges Project and other large transportation ventures cleared the Kentucky House today.

The bill advanced to the Senate on a 67-23 vote.

Lawmakers amended House Bill 102 to grant local officials greater say in how projects are managed, but they refused to consider a proposal that would have given city and county governments a role in crafting a financing plan.

The bill allows the head of governments where projects are located — Louisville's mayor, in the case of the bridges project — to appoint four members to a seven-person local authority. The governor had named the bulk of the members under the original bill.

"If it's a local authority, it would appear to me that they ought to be the majority," said Rep. Darryl Owens, D-Louisville, who pushed for the change.

Fourteen of Louisville's 18 representatives in the House supported the bill. Two who voted against it raised concerns that the measure doesn't allow Louisville Metro Government to help determine a financing plan.

Under the bill, a city or county would have to ask the governor to start a project by creating a local authority, which would ultimately suggest a financing plan and a construction schedule.

The local government's participation, however, ends there, although it would be consulted on a financing plan. The final say on toll rates, for example, would be left to the state authority.

Rep. Scott Brinkman, R-Louisville, proposed giving Louisville government a formal seat when the final plan is written, but the House didn't take up his amendment. Brinkman said he doubts a government would start a project without knowing the amount or duration of tolls.

Rep. Jim Wayne, D-Louisville, said Brinkman's proposal makes local governments accountable and called it "the responsible thing to do."

Brinkman and Wayne joined Rep. Kevin Bratcher, R-Louisville, in voting against the bill.

Rep. Ron Crimm, R-Louisville, did not vote.

But House Speaker Pro Tem Larry Clark, D-Louisville, said Brinkman's amendment amounted to local governments voting to enact tolls.

"And I don't think any local governing body will vote for tolls," said Clark, who voted for the bill but did not support the amendment.

Chad Carlton, a spokesman for Mayor Jerry Abramson, said the bill gives officials another tool to finance large projects, allowing for local, state and regional input.

"We definitely need a seat at the table at the local level, but it doesn't need to be the head seat," Carlton said.

Louisville Metro Council President David Tandy said he believes the bill doesn't go far enough, but local governments will have other checks and balances, such as scrutinizing appointees to a local authority.

The 11-member state authority would be chaired by Kentucky's Transportation Secretary. A key aspect of the bill, which is sponsored by Rep. Don Pasley, D-Winchester, allows the authority to enter into agreements with Indiana.

That could aid in the management of the \$4.1 billion bridges project in which the two states will share two new Ohio River spans in the Louisville area and a proposed Interstate 69 bridge near Henderson, Ky.

Local authorities, in conjunction with the state authority, would oversee the projects. To qualify, a venture would have to cost at least \$500 million. Kentucky's share of the bridges project is \$2.9 billion.

The bill now heads to the Senate. A similar measure died there last year, but Senate President David Williams, R-Burkesville, predicted last week that the legislation would clear both chambers this session.

"And if they don't pass now they need to pass early in the January session of next year," he said.

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