

Leaders talk progress, schedule on bridges

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— Dirt is not yet moving, girders aren't yet being hoisted and there are still only three automobile crossings over the Ohio River between Southern Indiana and Louisville.

However, that doesn't mean that progress isn't being made on the Ohio River Bridges Project, officials said.

Three people close to the project spoke Wednesday at The Louisville Forum, a nonpartisan public affairs group. The \$4.1 billion Ohio River Bridges project seeks to build two new crossings between Kentucky and Indiana — one in Utica and another in downtown Jeffersonville — and reconstruct Louisville's Spaghetti Junction, where Interstates 64, 65 and 71 meet.

The downtown portion of the project is deep in design, said John Sacksteder, project manager. Plans for the downtown portion are about 70 percent complete. He notes that Indiana is behind Kentucky on that part, but will be able to catch up because the Louisville side of the project is much more complicated.

However, he noted that there is property acquisition taking place in downtown Jeffersonville. Right-of-way acquisition also is taking place on the eastern portion of the project, near Utica.

"We are progressing even though you're not seeing things on the ground," said Sacksteder.

Indiana businessman Kerry Stemler, longtime backer of the project, spoke at the forum as well.

"This is the stimulus package this part of the country needs," he said, arguing that it would create jobs in the region well beyond just the construction phase.

Stemler recently was appointed to a bi-state board overseeing the project. He said he hopes to be a tool that administrations in both states could use to keep the project on track.

Timothy J. Hagerty — who served as attorney during the project's environmental impact study — noted that the bi-state commission would aid the project's completion.

"It's going to help us get it done more quickly and efficiently," he said.

Once final appointments are made, he said, the commission would be able to update the project's finance and construction plans. He believes the states could save millions by moving forward with the project now, while construction costs are lower.

QUESTIONS RAISED

- Forum members raised a question about a recent lawsuit filed by Louisville-based conservation group River Fields, which challenges aspects of the project's environmental impact study.

"We are confident the litigation will not slow down the projects," said Hagerty.

He said that an injunction has not been requested, so the project can move forward.

- It took Minnesota 18 months to construct a bridge to replace the one that collapsed on Interstate 35. The East End Bridge has been discussed for decades and the current project was approved by the federal government about six years ago.

Sacksteder rebutted that Minnesota was replacing a bridge. There was no property acquisition or utility relocation.

Additionally, he said, money is a factor.

The Ohio River Bridges project, as of last year, was the third-largest federally funded project in the nation.

- Tolls have been raised as a possible means of funding the project. One question was whether tolls would be applied to all bridges or just the new ones.

"The precise picture of what will evolve is not known," said Hagerty, noting that the bi-state authority will address such questions.

He said there had been talk of putting them on all the highway bridges and leaving the Clark Memorial Bridge as a free crossing. However, he noted that not tolling all the bridges could distort traffic patterns by encouraging motorists to take the nontolled crossing.

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