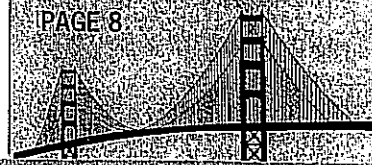


CLEVELAND BUSINESS

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PERSONAL VIEW

Crucial Innerbelt redo must begin soon

By ANTHONY D. LIBERATORE JR.

In 2000, the Ohio Department of Transportation authorized planning for one of the most important public works undertakings in Cleveland history: reconstruction of the Interstate 90 Innerbelt from East 55th Street south to the MetroHealth curve.

After years of public input, debate, and planning, the \$1.6 billion Cleveland Innerbelt Project emerged with high hopes that it would:

- create thousands of direct and indirect jobs.
- continue the renewal of downtown.
- repair one of the worst sections of the federal highway system nationwide and fix adjoining streets.
- contribute to the safety and well-being of Northeast Ohio motorists.

Anthony D. Liberatore Jr. is business manager of Laborers Local 860, whose members build the highways in Cuyahoga, Lake and Geauga counties.

ODOT knows that this small but important fragment of the Interstate system is unsafe at any speed. Cars, motorcycles and trucks race dangerously through the terrifying Dead Man's Curve at the north end. Nearby, Innerbelt entrances and exits are scary and out of date.

The same dangers apply farther south where I-77 merges into I-90 heading north. If you exit onto Carnegie Avenue while traffic is merging from I-77, you can close your eyes and hope for the best.

Accidents happen at Dead Man's Curve and at the Carnegie merge and all over the Innerbelt. Hour after hour. Day in and day out. They are costly and deadly. The city of

Cleveland knows this. So does ODOT. The Federal Highway Administration, which is committed to funding the lion's share of the reconstruction, also knows it.

To put this in perspective, the Innerbelt Study began before the election of President George W. Bush. It has concluded that the obvious cure for the dreadful Dead Man's Curve is a sweeping roadway bow and that certain entrances and exits must be closed or reconfigured.

ODOT also knows that something needs to be done about the Innerbelt Bridge across the Cuyahoga Valley. The bridge is bolstered on the south in Tremont by an unstable hillside, which requires ODOT to keep an eye on its stability. ODOT stepped up such monitoring after the horrifying bridge collapse in Minnesota last year.

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View: Traffic safety should be chief concern

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As a result of this inspection, ODOT is now planning to rehabilitate the Innerbelt Bridge at a cost of some \$150 million or more and, in the future, build an adjacent bridge. When the new bridge is complete, traffic will head one way on the old bridge and the other way on the new bridge. Meanwhile, ODOT has scrapped the idea of tearing down the existing bridge, because the rehabilitation will save money and preserve the old structure for another 50 to 70 years.

ODOT held neighborhood meetings. Its planners even asked participants what they wanted in an upgraded Innerbelt. As a result of such input, ODOT agreed to expand the scope of its initial plan and to convert the West Shoreway into a modern boulevard known as Lakefront West.

Further, ODOT listened to suggestions for an Opportunity Corridor which, as a boulevard, would link the I-490 terminus at East 55th Street into University Circle. Not only would this

relieve downtown traffic, it would provide commuters from the West Side, Hopkins Airport, and Akron with quick access to the ever-expanding institutions at or near University Circle.

The beauty of the Opportunity Corridor is that it cuts through an impoverished area and requires very few displacements. Neighborhood groups contend it would give a tremendous economic boost to the area.

The overall Innerbelt Project has been delayed, in part, by a disagreement over the closing of the Carnegie exit, which ODOT says is necessary to meet federal safety guidelines. Opponents claim it would cause economic hardship for nearby merchants.

The project also has been delayed because of ever-changing notions about the bridge and the cost of the Opportunity Corridor. Fortunately, the bridge controversy seems resolved.

But nothing should hold up or, God forbid, stop the full Innerbelt

reclamation, as well as the West Shoreway upgrade and the new Opportunity Corridor.

That would be economic suicide and perpetuate Cleveland's traffic-safety nightmare.

In fact, U.S. Sen. George V. Voinovich and U.S. Reps. Steve LaTourette and Stephanie Tubbs Jones have repeatedly emphasized that Northeast Ohio must upgrade its highway system or fall behind economically to more ambitious American and foreign locales.

ODOT has formed a high-level committee to study highway planning statewide. A great idea. Meanwhile, the most important highway reconstruction in Cleveland history needs to get under way. The stakes for Greater Cleveland are too high not to do something. And soon. ■

WRITE TO US

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