



ENVIRONMENTAL LAW & POLICY CENTER
Protecting the Midwest's Environment and Natural Heritage

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**Statement of Howard A. Learner,
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**Better, Cheaper and Cleaner Alternatives to Proposed Route 53 Tollroad Expansion in
Lake County**

Lake County residents will soon consider an advisory referendum for the proposed expansion of the Route 53 tollroad into Lake County. This massive 25-mile tollroad expansion faces the same fundamental problems that have stopped it for years: billions of dollars in construction costs, the limited effectiveness of a massive new north-south tollroad for alleviating west-east traffic congestion, and the harmful environmental impacts of paving over wetlands and more air pollution. There are better, cheaper and environmentally safer alternatives.

First of all, the projected blockbuster construction cost of about \$1.5 billion or more for this tollroad expansion is largely unaffordable in today's economy without raising tolls on the Tri-State Tollway in Lake County and other tollroads. Moreover, that construction cost estimate was made years ago by the Illinois State Toll Highway Authority, and it is likely to go up if and when this tollroad expansion is actually built at some future date. There are good reasons why the Toll Highway Authority itself has eliminated the Route 53 Tollroad expansion from its 10-Year plan.

Second, the success of the new Metra North Central rail line in gaining passengers and other related experiences have shown that better and cheaper transportation management alternatives can work well. Improved passenger rail service, arterial and local road improvements, and transit-oriented development strategies can effectively reduce congestion and promote mobility. Let's be smart about how to relieve traffic congestion with the best solutions to address the real problems.

Third, the environmental harms of the proposed Route 53 tollroad expansion are substantial. This new tollroad would slash through ecologically rich wetlands and threaten key species habitat in Lake County. The additional tollroad traffic would also produce more harmful air pollution, which threatens our children's health. The proposed tollroad and related development would also risk making the current Lake County flooding problems worse by paving over wetlands, which absorb rainfall.

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The outdated Environmental Impact Statement for the proposed Route 53 tollroad expansion would have to be largely re-done. That key environmental information should precede and inform public debate and engage discussion. The Environmental Law & Policy Center will review any future actions to actually go forward with the proposed Route 53 tollroad expansion in order to assure compliance with environmental and other laws.

Fourth, the asserted need for the Route 53 tollroad expansion was based on housing development and population growth forecasts that assumed a much more robust economy than today's very challenging economic climate. As we painfully know, there is no housing development boom today. We hope and believe that the economy will greatly improve in the reasonably near future. However, the lessons learned from the housing bubble of the past decade are likely to lead to smarter housing development approaches in the future—we hope.

Let's be smarter going forward about spending transportation funds wisely in ways that provide real solutions to congestion relief problems and do so in ways that protect our environment and communities' quality of life. Building the massive Route 53 tollroad expansion is an old approach. It's time for change with better, cheaper and cleaner transportation alternatives and strategies for Lake County and our region.

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