

Economic Boon Anticipated with Marengo Interchange

By Gregory Harutunian

By the fall of 2023, the Jane Addams Memorial Tollway, also known as a section of Interstate 90, will have gained the "Exit 36" accesses to the city of Marengo and Route 23. Construction work to add lanes, widen and strengthen the bridge spanning the tollway in order to accommodate heavier traffic is expected to be completed later this year.

An Aug. 22 open house, convened at the Marengo City Hall, touted the project's status and eventual finish using a projected virtual animation loop demonstrating the usage by vehicle traffic, and placard displays on easels. Members of the city administration, Mc Henry-based HR Green, the project's engineering firm, several local industry leaders were also mingling with the constant stream of interested residents to answer questions.

The by-product residual impact on city coffers is an economic boost adding to its tax base with light industrial companies, a truck stop fueling station, and a restaurant surrounding the new exit. The goal is also to keep the commercial growth at the access points, five miles south of Marengo proper, and maintain the "small hometown atmosphere," it now enjoys.

"We want to bring that type of commercial growth there, and things that would provide services to the people that work in the vicinity," said Marengo Mayor John Koziol. "There are buffers in place with aggregate mining and soil companies along the way, and no plans for residential developments. This will help keep the 'small-town feel' of the town, something we don't want to disrupt."

"Maybe decades later, there may be some change but this is in synch with our comprehensive plan, which is to create jobs and economic growth while maintaining our historic downtown and its charm," he

said. "The project has been considered for decades, and now, it's coming to fruition."

The project employs two access ramps to exit and enter the tollway, along with three roundabouts positioned at three major roads to keep traffic flow patterns moving freely. It followed a partial cloverleaf-partial diamond pattern, the last of four considered renderings of traffic regulators that included decisions on committing to stop signs, a signal array, and no designs inferences at all.

"It took three years from concept to the present; it was talked about and anticipated," said Jeff Pisha, the project manager. "My duties are to oversee the project and coordinate the activities. We will go for contract bid-letting to complete the ramp accesses in 2019. Overall, the cost is estimated at \$36 million inclusive of the engineering, the right-of-way acquisitions, and the actual construction."

Tina Kropke and Heather Schweitzer, from Premier Commercial Realty in Marengo, also attended the event to represent parcel sellers, from 16 to 137 acres, near the construction site. "It's crop fields, and an exciting prospect with the interchange," said Kropke.

Starting in 2013, properties along Route 23 leading from the tollway site were methodically annexed into the Marengo boundaries to create a contiguous line. Once the project is completed, it will be the only tollway access point into Mc Henry County. It will also be in Marengo's jurisdiction.

"It's the bridge finishing this year, the easements and ramps in the fall 2023, with roundabouts," said Acting City Manager Josh Blakemore. "The city's revenues have been basically stagnant. The project is significant in being the only tollway access into the county, and as a gateway to developing jobs with the introduction of light industry in that sector."

Third Ward Alderman Matt Keenum not-

ed, "There will not be a retail strip mall, or a big box store in that area. Only light industrial that will add tax dollars...and no residential developments would be there. Increasing the school populations would negate any gains in revenue. The commercial aspect would pose no disruption, as it's far enough away from town."

Koziol also agreed that the industrial components should remain by the tollway. "My take is don't change things...we keep the old downtown feel of things. There's a residential buffer, gravel pits between the tollway and the town. It's ripe for an economic boon and we should tap into it. It can help Marengo, the county, the state, and the Midwest."

"We're not landlocked either, we can expand to the east and west," he said. "It's about job creation...let's make this happen."



Bridge widening is expected to be completed later this year.



A virtual animation display shows how truck traffic will navigate one of the interchange roundabouts, prior to crossing the Route 23 bridge.

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