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A Bridges Reality Check: Jobs – Safety - Traffic

By Steve Wiser, AIA

“Jobs – Safety - Traffic” are the three primary reasons featured in a television commercial promoting construction of the \$4.1 billion dollar Ohio River Bridges Project (ORBP). As with any ad campaign, the information presented is favorably presented toward building a new downtown bridge, rebuilt Spaghetti Junction, and a new East End Bridge. What this ad doesn't tell you is that tolls are proposed on all the bridges (new and existing), as well as possibly Spaghetti Junction, to pay for all of this. And, this ad only tells you one side of this debate.

Before tolls culturally divide this community in half, and serve as obstacles to its future success, let's look at the ORBP's two-bridge rationale as presented in their ad campaign.

First, let's look at the “Jobs” reason. About 5,400 construction jobs will be created over a ten year period. Definitely a plus, but the real goal is long-term employment gains, not short-term jobs. Toll will hurt businesses on both sides of the river. There is no positive upside to this growth-depressing scenario. And, with our economy based on transportation, what logistics business will want to relocate to a toll-based community? As a reality check, do you think our regional competitors of Indianapolis, Nashville, or Cincinnati would ever divide their communities in half with tolls?

Safety is something everyone can agree on, yes? Well, how will super-sizing Spaghetti Junction make it safer? Increased speed combined with merging and lane-changing is a recipe for a potential nightmare. A recent news report spotlighted a similar outcome of more crashes following the I-64 widening at I-264 due to faster traffic while lane-changing.

While emergency pull-off lanes on the Kennedy Bridge are a preferred safety feature, there are no other interstate bridges in this region (or, for that matter any I-64 bridge between Ashland and Kansas City) that have emergency pull-off lanes. Will we begin replacing these dozen or so bridges as well? The fact is that once the East End Bridge is built, and volume lessened, emergency pull-off lanes should be able to be recaptured on the Kennedy.

There has only been one death in Spaghetti Junction in the last ten years. Most of the congestion is caused by accidents outside the junction, which then domino into it. For instance, recently two major grid-locks occurred from jack-knifed trucks: one on I-64 eastbound at the tunnel; and, the other I-65 northbound at the Muhammad Ali overpass. Neither of these incidents would have been solved by a rebuilt Spaghetti Junction. During June of 2010, a study of delays revealed that only one congestion

would have been avoided. Reality check: why spend \$4.1 billion that may make the situation worse?

Everyone agrees that traffic downtown at rush hour is a mess. But, of the various bridge options, which one would actually improve cross-river mobility? Per the ORBP's own "Environmental Impact Statement" (2003, page 3-67), the East End Bridge and other existing bridges (without the new downtown bridge or rebuilt Junction) would handle the most overall traffic at 363,200 vehicles in 2025. The East End Bridge is projected to carry about 50% of the volume the Kennedy will hold (72,100 vs. 146,100).

Building a new downtown and East End Bridge would have LESS cars, per the ORBP's own statistics. In addition, up to one-third of the heavy truck traffic would be diverted to the East End Bridge. And, bridge traffic volume was projected to increase 25% over the past 7 years, while it has actually declined. Reality check: in all the public surveys, the East End Bridge has overwhelming support for construction now.

Those behind this pro-bridges television commercial say that tolls and the \$4.1 billion dollar project are the only answer. Otherwise, delay and even more congestion will result. This all or nothing approach has resulted in nothing happening for the last 15 years. Reality check: this community has waited almost 50 years for a new bridge. Let's make sure we don't damage our economic future with a bad, out-of-date design which will be paid for with tolls for at least the next 30 years or more.

A more reasonable and affordable solution is to phase the project by expediting construction of the East End Bridge. Then determine how volumes are affected. We could also possibly create a new I-64 / I-71 gateway connector into downtown, and build one or two local-access bridges. This can be done within five years and for less than \$2 billion dollars with no tolls (or, a toll only on the East End Bridge).

The reality is that Jobs-Safety-Traffic are vital to the future growth of metro Louisville. Let's get this right with no tolls on existing bridges, no entirely rebuilt Spaghetti Junction, and considering a more innovative realistic local-access bridge / downtown gateway plan.

(Steve Wiser, AIA, is a local architect and historian. More details on his local -access bridge proposal can be found at www.WiserDesigns.com)