

Instead of spending a billion dollars on a highway that provides “quite small benefits,” fund a local road network that will reduce traffic congestion.

Recommendation: Appropriate funds in the operating budget or any potential capital budget for critical improvements to a comprehensive network of local roads instead of the Prairie Parkway. There is still time to ensure the region receives an effective transportation alternative, and that the highway does not divert critical funding for projects that are immediately needed throughout the area.

Background: On June 1, 2007, the Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT) announced its decision to build a new north-south highway between I-80 and I-88, predominately through agricultural areas in Kane, Kendall and Grundy Counties. The plan also ultimately calls for expanding IL-47 south of Caton Farm Road. IDOT will take over 2,500 acres of farmland for the highway. The road will spur development in areas designated as agriculture in all three county comprehensive land use plans, further impacting approximately 5,400 acres of farmland. The four-lane highway will degrade pristine streams, such as Big Rock Creek and Aux Sable Creek, harm threatened and endangered species, and damage 57 jurisdictional wetlands. It will destroy 54 acres of forests, where 27 kinds of neo-tropical migrant birds are known to nest.

There is a better alternative. Instead of spending approximately one billion dollars on a highway that IDOT admitted provides “quite small benefits,” the State’s limited funding can be used to improve a local network of roads where communities have planned for development. Investing in local infrastructure not only resolves traffic problems, but gives farmers the choice over the future of their land, and minimizes damage to irreplaceable natural areas.

IDOT plans to cut off east-west roadways, such as Wheeler Road by Sugar Grove, Lasher Road near Kaneville, and Schaefer Road between Yorkville and Plano, even though they are critical components of a larger road network that allows traffic to move through more populated areas. Instead of closing 13 roads to construct a new north-south route, limited tax dollars should be used to both repair and improve a grid of local roads, such as IL-47, Wikaduke, Eldamain, IL-126, US-34 and IL-71.

Points of Interest:

- IDOT’s revised 5-year plan would only fund construction for 5 miles of the 37-mile highway, between IL-34 and IL-71. It excludes any funding to widen IL-47.
- IDOT’s new traffic study bolsters the highway’s effectiveness by including statistics for WiKaDuKe, a road not included as a part of the Prairie Parkway project.
- IDOT never reconciled serious flaws in its agricultural and environmental analysis that it used in its cost-benefit analysis before it decided to build the highway.
- IDOT’s billion dollar choice could divert critical funding from effective projects in the region.
- IDOT failed to release the incredibly high Land Evaluation Site Assessment scores until after it closed the Draft EIS public comment period. Farmland in the path of the highway scored an astronomical 281 out of 300. IDOT did not give communities the opportunity to use these studies to determine whether farmland in their area was too valuable to destroy.

Choosing a better local alternative is supported by 47+, a coalition of the following organizations:

American Farmland Trust

Aux Sable Creek Watershed Group

Center for Neighborhood Technology

Citizens Against the Sprawlway

Environmental Law and Policy Center

Kendall Citizens for Farmland Protection

Friends of the Fox River

Natural Resources Defense Council

Nettle Creek Watershed Conservancy

Openlands

Prairie Rivers Network

Sierra Club, Illinois Chapter