

Fund Critical Local Transportation Needs
Instead of the Prairie Parkway

Recommendation: Instead of authorizing a state match for a billion dollar highway that the Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT) admits provides “quite small benefits,” approve funding for critical improvements to a local network of roads where communities have planned for development. Ensure that any capital budget contains line items to widen, connect and repair local roads, rather diverting such funding to pay for the Prairie Parkway. Investing in local infrastructure not only resolves traffic problems, but gives farmers a choice over the future of their land, and minimizes damage to irreplaceable natural areas.

Route: On June 1, 2007, IDOT chose the “B5” route for the Prairie Parkway. The north-south highway would connect I-80 and I-88 near IL-47, through Kane and Kendall Counties. The project includes future plans to widen part of IL-47 south of Caton Farm Road.

Issues:

1. IDOT does not demonstrate a justifiable need for the Prairie Parkway.
 - IDOT acknowledges in its Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) that, in comparison to its No Action Alternative, the benefits of the Prairie Parkway “appear to be quite small.” (See DEIS, p. 3-33.)
 - For approximately a billion dollars, the proposed highway would only improve average local speeds on arterial roads by less than one mile per hour.
 - IDOT’s new traffic study mischaracterizes the highway’s effectiveness by including statistics for Wikaduke, a road not included as a part of the Prairie Parkway project.

2. Traffic
 - IDOT only considered North-South alternatives that predominately cut through agricultural and rural areas. In most of the populated areas in the region, such as Yorkville and Sugar Grove, residents also need to travel in an east-west direction.
 - IDOT’s revised 5-year plan only requests funding for building 5 miles of the 37-mile highway, and excludes proposed improvements to I-47 south of Caton Farm Road.
 - Spending a billion dollars on the Prairie Parkway will divert funding for critical improvements to a network of local roads that serve the immediate transportation needs of the region. Major projects that merit funding include: the Eldamain Road expansion and bridge (which creates a Yorkville western bypass by connecting to Galena Road); the WiKaDuKe Trail (which connects I-80 and I-88 by upgrading and connecting existing roads at the eastern edge of Kendall County); and expansion and improvement of the entire stretch of Illinois 47 between I-80 and I-88, IL-126, US-34 and IL-71.
 - IDOT plans to close 13 of 37 roads crossing the path of the proposed highway, including Wheeler and Lasher Road. Numerous residents opposed these road closures in public hearings on July 11 and 12, 2007. IDOT has rejected the request by Sugar Grove to keep Wheeler Road open.

3. Impacts to Farmland

The DEIS understates the impact the highway will have on prime farmland.

 - The chosen route impacts 2,560 acres and 189 farms. It would affect 726 acres of Class 1 soils, 1,750 acres of Class 2 soils, and 43 acres of Class 3 soils.

- The DEIS fails to consider how air emissions and contaminants in runoff, such as deicing materials, oil and metals will damage crops and degrade high quality soils.
- The DEIS downplays the economic impact to agricultural businesses. Agriculture is the primary land use in Grundy, Kane and Kendall Counties.
- *Land Evaluation Site Assessment (LESA)*: IDOT would not release LESA figures that disclose the quality of farmland in the path of the project until after it closed the DEIS public comment period. According to the Illinois Department of Agriculture, farmland in the path of the highway scored an astronomical **281 out of 300**. High LESA scores of 226 to 300 indicate farmland should be retained for agricultural use, and an alternative alignment should be considered. The delay prevented municipalities and counties from relying on the LESA study to determine whether farmland in their area is too valuable to be destroyed.

4. Environmental Impacts

- IDOT underestimates the direct, indirect and cumulative impacts of the Prairie Parkway on the Fox River and Illinois River watersheds.
- The proposed highway crosses streams and tributaries at least 83 times, destroys 54 acres of forests, and could impact threatened and endangered species, such as Osprey, Slippershell mussels, Rock Elm trees, and a nursery of Greater Redhorse fish
- The highway would degrade Class A waterways, such as pristine stretches of Big Rock Creek and Aux Sable Creek.
- The DEIS mischaracterizes the quality of several waterways by using outdated data from 1989 to 1993, and downplays negative effects from factors such as runoff, salt and siltation on sensitive aquatic habitats.
- IDOT only proposes to mitigate impacts to approximately 2.71 acres of the fifty seven jurisdictional wetlands in the direct path of the 37-mile stretch of the proposed highway.
- The DEIS downplays the negative effects of salt and fragmentation on plants and animals in forests along the highway.

5. Unmanaged growth

- Building the highway along the B5 route will spur growth south and west of planned development areas. The shift is inconsistent with county and municipal land use plans, which designate much of the area as agricultural or rural residential. The induced growth will further encroach upon natural areas and accelerate the loss of prime farmland.
- The DEIS downplays how much the highway would encourage growth in rural areas by comparing the projected population in low density areas to regional population growth estimates. By combining figures from low and high density areas, IDOT understates the magnitude of economic and cultural impacts in less populated rural communities.

Proponents: 47+, a coalition that includes: Citizens Against the Sprawlway, American Farmland Trust, Aux Sable Creek Watershed Group, Center for Neighborhood Technology, Environmental Law and Policy Center, Friends of the Fox River, Kendall Citizens for Farmland Protection, Natural Resources Defense Counsel, Nettle Creek Watershed Conservancy, Openlands, Prairie Rivers Network, and Sierra Club (Illinois Chapter).

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