

MINUTES
I-290/Eisenhower Citizens Committee
Oak Park Village Hall Council Chambers
March 14, 2002

Present: Lawrence Christmas, Chair; Philip J. Rock, Mark Johnson, Sandra Kupelian, Karen Baldwin, Kevin Kell, Ron Burke, Marion Kessy, Pete Morava, Nancy Rodriquez

Absent: David Sokol; Plan Commission representative (to be named)

Also

Present: Joanne E. Trapani, President; Carl Swenson, Village Manager; Pete Dame, Assistant to the Village Manager and Liaison to the Committee

Call to Order

Chair Christmas called the meeting to order at 7:00 p.m. and welcomed all to the first meeting of the I-290/Eishenhower Citizens Committee.

President Trapani also welcomed members, stating that the neighbors on both sides of the Eisenhower will be affected by the proposed I-290 project, and that she appreciates the committee's willingness to serve and lend their expertise. She welcomes their input, and expects these meetings to be informative to the community. Information from these meetings will be communicated to the Board of Trustees and to staff members who will be assisting on this project, and the community should use the committee as a conduit with the Village.

Chairperson's Comments

Because some members of the committee are not acquainted, Mr. Christmas asked that the members introduce themselves, giving a brief background of their credentials, interests and talents. Speaking for the absent David Sokol, Mr. Christmas stated that Mr. Sokol is a former Village trustee, a professor and department chair at UIC, and former chair of the Historic Preservation Commission.

Ron Burke: Mr. Burke works for the American Lung Association, and is an air quality expert concerned about the potential implications of air pollution.

Kevin Kell: Mr. Kell is a civil engineer, and a past and current member of the Village and Park District Infrastructure Committee. He has a background in design plans and is familiar with many of the issues to be dealt with.

Sandra Kupelian: Ms. Kupelian is an attorney who is active in the South Oak Park Community Council. She looks forward to working on this challenging issue.

Mark Johnson: Mr. Johnson is a 20-year resident of Oak Park who has served on the Village's Parking and Traffic Commission. He is a civil engineer and County highway official.

Nancy Rodriguez: Ms. Rodriguez is a resident of the 1000 block of Clinton and owns a business on the 900 block of South Oak Park Avenue. She is a member of the Oak Park/Eisenhower Business District Association, and looks forward to participating in this grass roots effort.

Karen Baldwin: A resident who has lived on both sides of the expressway, Ms. Baldwin is a member of the Community Relations Commission, and former chair of the Citizen Involvement Committee. She has a vested interest in these issues, and feels Oak Park will be directly impacted by increased traffic, in addition to noise and pollution

Marion Kessy: Mr. Kessy is a civil engineer who has nine years experience on IDOT projects, and has expertise in several aspects of this process and how projects get done.

Philip J. Rock: Former State Senate President and Senate majority leader, Mr. Rock is well acquainted with transportation issues involved. He commissioned an Air Rights Feasibility Study several years ago, and is prepared to help.

Pete Morava: Mr. Morava, President of the Harrison Street Business Alliance, is also a resident on Austin/Harrison, and will be directly impacted by IDOT's improvements.

Lawrence B. Christmas: Mr. Christmas has served as the Executive Director of the Northeastern Illinois Planning Commission (NIPC), and is a former Oak Park Village President. As a planner, he has worked on long-range transportation studies and improvement programs as well as environmental impact studies.

Business

Charge/Rules of Operation

Mr. Christmas explained that all meetings will fall under the Open Meetings Act, and as such will be advertised and available to the public. Meetings may be held once a month, on an agreed-upon monthly date. Mr. Christmas asked members to contact Pete Dame with dates when they would not be available so that Mr. Dame can establish a permanent meeting date/time.

The committee will be informing the Board on their findings, and wishes to proceed on a group consensus based model, rather than a voting model. At no time should members feel censored, and they are to speak freely. Mr. Christmas stated he would try to avoid situations requiring a vote, and that all opinions would be represented.

Clear and accurate minutes are of prime concern as they will convey expressions of ideas, thoughts and language. Draft minutes will be forwarded to members, who are to feel free to respond to them via Mr. Dame. The minutes should keep the Board informed as to progress being made. At this point, Mr. Dame requested that members forward their e-mail addresses to him. He can be reached at dame@vil.oak-park.il.us.

Mr. Christmas continued: There may be occasions when statements from the Village will be needed, and the committee may be asked to review and comment before this information is released. All members are urged to make suggestions on revising or adding to this information.

With this type of planning, Mr. Burke questioned Mr. Christmas as to how we would participate in the political side of this issue. Mr. Christmas responded that we cannot prevent politics from happening, but it would be politics with a “little p.”

Mr. Christmas stated that we have been formally charged by the Village President and Board of Trustees, but he wishes to establish as a goal that the Village and our neighborhoods adjacent to the expressway are improved, and is optimistic that this could be done. Mr. Christmas continued: For those who might be wondering whether to fix the roof of their house or make other improvements, it is important to remember that historically those who bet against the Village's chances of overcoming adversity lost their bet. It is just as important today as it was then that all property is well maintained.

HOV Project Outline and Status

Pete Dame, liaison to the committee, stated that he is an eight-year Village employee who lives within two blocks of the expressway. During his association with the Village Manager's Office, he has worked on the newly completed

Intermodal Transportation Station. While employed for a Michigan congressman, Mr. Dame handled federal transportation programs.

Mr. Dame then gave a brief history of the project through a visual presentation. IDOT, in order to develop a formally approved plan to rebuild the Eisenhower Expressway, is now conducting a Phase I preliminary environmental and engineering study for the improvement of I-290 between Mannheim Road and Cicero. The study will help to determine whether I-290 congestion can be alleviated during reconstruction by adding HOV (High Occupancy Vehicle) lanes in each direction between Austin and Mannheim. An HOV feasibility study concluded in 1998 determined that the HOV concept is feasible but will be much more expensive than reconstructing the expressway in its current configuration. Accommodating the HOV lanes will mean rebuilding almost every bridge and overpass along the entire route as well as moving the railroad tracks in some fashion.

No funding for construction or future design phases for this project has been allocated in IDOT's 2002 through 2006 Highway Improvement Program. The anticipated cost is \$600-\$800 million, and the Village anticipates IDOT will seek federal funds for the project as part of next year's federal transportation programs reauthorization. Mr. Dame referred members to a map of the project from Circle Avenue in Forest Park to Laramie Avenue in the city. A major concern is the ramp at Central Avenue which would impact Columbus Park. Potential areas for purchase would be at Harlem and Austin; however, this is still unknown. The possibility of double-stacking the rail lines was noted, and has not been ruled out. Ms. Rodriguez questioned the "Enforcement Area" noted on the map, and was informed that this would be the area police cars can monitor the HOV lanes. She also expressed concern about vibrations from the railroad tracks, which Mr. Dame noted may be moved southward. In response to Ms. Kupelian's question on the availability of Village documents related to this issue, Mr. Dame stated these would be forwarded to members.

Mr. Dame stressed that IDOT has not looked at any alternatives to highway expansion, nor the potential impact on the neighborhoods, air quality and traffic. There could be a major impact to the business districts on Harrison Street and South Oak Park Avenue, which is divided by the expressway, all of which concerns the Village. IDOT has consistently stated its objective is to not affect Oak Park's frontage lands adjacent to the highway, or the properties on the other sides.

Mr. Kessy questioned whether the Village was just opposed to the HOV or to an additional lane. Mr. Dame responded that the HOV concept is what is under consideration by IDOT, and must meet clean air goals. Additional lanes cannot typically be justified in non-containment areas; therefore HOVs can be used.

Mr. Burke stated that in the past, IDOT usually found ways to squeeze in additional lanes regardless of the air quality, and questioned whether the Village was opposed to adding lanes. Mr. Christmas responded that later this evening, members will be viewing a letter to the Council of Mayors Executive Committee, Chicago Area Transportation Study (CATS), asking for the elimination of HOV lanes from the region's long-term plan.

Mr. Kessy stated he has not heard how the concept was developed, and asked if IDOT has looked into all the alternatives. Mr. Dame responded that IDOT has not done an analysis, and the Village is recommending that they do so.

Mr. Burke questioned the possibility of working with the CTA on a mutual plan, similar to what occurred with the CTA's Orange Line located near the Stevenson Expressway, which resulted in the elimination of the HOV concept for the Stevenson during construction.

Strategy Overview

Mr. Dame then introduced Kurt Blase from the firm of O'Connor and Hannon, who has been hired by the Village to provide legal, technical and lobbying assistance to the Village. Mr. Blase stated his firm has just completed several similar cases, and that they have the technical expertise for this project. He stated the Village's position will be to oppose this project until additional studies are made, at which time we may possibly be able to come to an agreement on the nature of the final project. Until that time, the Village will not support their plans.

Mr. Blase then gave a visual presentation on the Village's strategy. He explained the federal funding process, noting that none of the federally required studies listed have been done (major investment study, congestion management study, and NEPA analysis).

In response to an inquiry from Mr. Burke regarding studies done for the "Hillside Strangler" project, Mr. Blase stated that this is unknown. President Trapani stated that no significant studies have been made, other than promises to build. Mr. Swenson stated the Village has moved quickly because studies have not been done nor has IDOT's plan been challenged.

Concerning the issue of a timetable raised by Mr. Morava, Mr. Blase stated this will be discussed later. Of major concern are the three studies: Congestion Mitigation, Major Investment and NEPA. Chair Christmas noted that these studies are prepared by IDOT or their agencies.

Mr. Blase explained: A major investment study is required before proceeding with any major federally funded transportation project. This study would identify the viable alternatives and examine the economic, social and environmental impact of each. A congestion management study must be done if the proposed transportation project would affect a non-attainment area under the federal Clean Air Act, and would examine the various options for relieving congestion and the air quality impacts of each. The NEPA analysis is an analysis of the overall environmental impacts of the various alternatives in the above two studies, based on information provided in those studies. This could be an EIS (Environmental Impact Statement) or an EA (Environmental Assessment) leading to an EIS or a FONSI (finding of no significant impact). Mr. Kessy questioned how IDOT could be prompted to make a more detailed study; Mr. Blase responded that the studies are done at IDOT's discretion, and evidently they did not feel an EIS to be necessary at this point. Mr. Kessy feels we must apply pressure to IDOT to complete these studies.

President Trapani stated that she has spoken with David Sokol about whether the project would have a negative impact on the Gunderson district. It is felt that IDOT must by law consider the potential impact.

Mr. Blase stated that IDOT initially stated they would not conduct these three studies, but agreed to at a stakeholder meeting last week. However, they indicated they are only planning an EA, not an EIS, at this time. We could anticipate this draft report late this year or next year. The Phase I study should be complete by the end of 2004. In response to an inquiry as to who attended the stakeholder's meeting, Mr. Blase stated that representatives of municipalities bordering the expressway attended this informal meeting to discuss their plans.

Mr. Christmas referred members to a letter to the Chicago Area Transportation Study regarding the Village's "Input to Development of Long Range Regional Transportation Plan" which will be submitted to them on March 15, 2002. Mr. Christmas apologized for the short notice, and asked that members review this letter and forward any comments to Mr. Dame before noon on March 15th. Mr. Dame stated that the Village Board has already seen and approved this letter, and that the committee's comments are welcome.

Mr. Christmas stated that this letter requests CATS to take specific actions to ensure the I-290 HOV project will not move forward until all potential alternatives and related impacts have been considered and addressed. Mr. Christmas stated there are several possible alternatives available, including expansion of the Metra service.

Mr. Johnson commented that while the Village advocates not creating HOV lanes because studies have not been made, the letter to CATS advocates extending the CTA Blue Line which also has not had any supporting studies. Mr. Rock sought

and received confirmation that the 2030 RTP will replace the 2020 RTP, which will die at the end of next year, and that the CTA Blue Line extension is requested for inclusion in the 2030 RTP.

Mr. Blase stated that the Village's intended participation in the IDOT Phase I study includes providing guidance to IDOT on compliance with federal study requirements, legal and technical support for justifying IDOT's preparation of an EIS, and monitoring/communication activities and seeking public involvement by IDOT as the study plans are developed.

Mr. Kell commented that he has not heard anything about a Purpose and Needs Statement, which dictates alternatives. Mr. Kessy questioned the funding mechanism for the alternative studies; Mr. Blase responded that there would need to be federal money made available for such a study. It was noted that IDOT funding sources financed the RTA study of alternatives in northwest Chicago along the I-90. President Trapani stated funding mechanisms are not as important as getting the studies done. Mr. Kessy expressed concern that the funding source for these studies could possibly shade the outcome of the study; Mr. Christmas responded that our role is to "keep them honest." In addition, Mr. Christmas stated that CATS will not adopt a project into the regional transportation plan that does not have a sponsor.

Mr. Burke questioned additional services O'Connor and Hannan will be providing to the Village. Mr. Blase confirmed that O'Connor and Hannan provides lobbying services for the Village on this project in Washington, D.C. and that it is associated with a prominent lobbying law firm in Springfield. Mr. Burke stated that we must reach out to our elected officials to try and dovetail with the lobbyists and citizens. President Trapani stated that some of the issues involved are unique to Oak Park, and that other communities have different interests and approaches. We hope to set the groundwork so that lobbyists in Washington and/or Springfield will understand what the neighborhoods are doing as well.

Mr. Dame concluded by stating this firm brings a two-pronged approach to the Village—knowledge of federal transportation and environmental laws as well as lobbying assistance. We are now starting our technical position, and will move on to lobbying later. Mr. Swenson stated O'Connor and Hannan's history of transportation/environmental litigation and lobbying experience in these kinds of projects will be of benefit during this process.

Public Comment

Sam Harnish, 700 block North Woodbine: In summary, Mr. Harnish wishes to present what he perceives to be a minority view. As a former computer consultant working in communities west of Oak Park, we need to keep in mind that there are

Oak Park citizens who have “escaped” the “Hillside strangler” only to run into the “First Avenue strangler.” This evening he noted affects of the congestion from air pollution prevalent in a two-block area around the expressway. The CTA now appears to be interested in extending their line westward to Lisle; however, it is his opinion that this very expensive project will not happen. His concern is that this committee must realize that there are a lot of people in Oak Park who do not live close to public transportation or the expressway. We must address some way to decrease traffic on the expressway or getting traffic through here faster. He would hate to think that our only consideration is trying to stop this project when it is obvious that something has to be done.

Fred Brandstrater, 840 S. Clinton: He attended the stakeholder meeting at which time IDOT stated that the RTA may be able to provide a multi-modal solution for this corridor—highways, transportation (CTA, Metra) and local neighborhood arteries and buses. IDOT admitted they are strictly focusing on highways. When questioned as to what governing body oversees further studies of the CTA and Metra, they responded CATS. IDOT also admitted these other agencies should be bringing forth their studies as well.

Adjournment

Mr. Christmas asked members to forward the following information to Mr. Dame: 1. e-mail address; 2. information on meeting dates; and 3. input on CATS letter. Mr. Kell inquired whether members would have more advance notice for response time on future correspondence. Mr. Christmas apologized and stated this type of short notice is not anticipated on a regular basis.

Mr. Kessy inquired as to the availability of the Feasibility Study. Mr. Swenson stated this document is not in a format to be easily copied, but that if interest is expressed, excerpts of salient items can be copied and distributed.

There being no further business, the meeting adjourned at 9:10 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Brenda K. Fojtik, Recorder