

Paving the countryside a bad option for Highway 60

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The DOT remedy for congestion on the road is radical widening or land-consuming bypasses; affected communities want no part of either option, with good reason

Traffic is getting progressively heavier on Highway 60 between the villages of Grafton and Jackson. There is some congestion at peak commuting times that causes traffic to slow down and there have been some accidents at intersections.

Sounds like there could be a problem here. What to do?

Simple. Just replace parts of the road with magnificent new bypass highways that would be nearly three times as wide as the existing road and consume hundreds of acres of farmland, wetland and green space.

That this is one of the options proposed by the Wisconsin Department of Transportation for the rebuilding of Highway 60 between the west side of Jackson and downtown Grafton suggests the department is lost in a time warp (circa 1960s) in which the consequences of urban sprawl, the benefits of preserving the green countryside and the wisdom of reining in highway spending are foreign concepts.

These grand swaths of concrete are proposed to reroute the highway around Five Corners and Jackson. The Town Board of Cedarburg, in which Five Corners is located, and the Village Board of Jackson have approved strongly worded resolutions opposing the bypasses and every other option proposed by the DOT for reconstruction of Highway 60.

They have plenty of company. A group of property owners organized under the name Mi60, the City of Cedarburg, business owners, homeowners and even Cedarburg's St. Francis Borgia Catholic Parish oppose the DOT proposals.

Each of these stakeholders has specific reasons to fight the DOT proposals. The parish objects because one of the bypasses would go through land it owns in the Town of Cedarburg that is to be the site of a new parish school. Other opponents cite the damage to businesses caused by rerouting the highway and the loss of land, homes and commercial buildings that would be claimed for the wider highway right of way under the various DOT options.

Taxpayers who don't own property along the highway and don't drive on it regularly have a stake in the rebuilding of the highway too. For what the DOT is proposing would cost millions of tax dollars and the bypass plan would be a setback for enlightened use of the once-rural land west of Grafton that would be widely felt.

The long, super-wide bypasses (270 feet wide compared to the current Highway 60

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right-of-way width of 100 feet), like other Highway 60 widening proposals, would be a traffic magnets that would hasten the day when the rebuilt highway would be congested again.

The DOT defends the bypasses as a better option than taking land, some of which is occupied by historic buildings in Jackson, to widen the existing highway.

Here's an even better option: Don't widen the road in Jackson.

Building a bigger highway is a typical first choice for DOT—a bureaucratic knee-jerk reaction from an agency whose highway budget for this year is just under half a billion dollars—but there are other ways to make the road safer and mitigate some of the congestion, using features like turning lanes and roundabouts, or opting for selective widening and speed limit reductions.

Congested highways are the wages of development. Government has an obligation to take reasonable measures to abet safety, but there is no imperative to ensure that travel on roads like Highway 60 is fast or free of inconvenient slow-downs at all times.

Congested roads are a gentle brake on speeding development, while wider roads built to facilitate faster travel fuel a revolving dynamic of wide highways leading to accelerated development leading to congested highways leading to pressure to build even wider highways.

At a public meeting in Jackson starting at 4 p.m. Thursday, DOT staff members will present their plans for Highway 60. Their presentation will be met with well-founded opposition to excessive widening and wasteful bypasses. DOT decision makers should pay heed.