

Business First of Columbus - December 10, 2007

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## COLUMBUS BUSINESS FIRST

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# Alum Creek bypass eyed for Rickenbacker traffic

Business First of Columbus - by [Adrian Burns](#) Business First

Inadequate highways could put Columbus at a disadvantage in the competition with other cities to become the region's dominant logistics hub, area planners say.

Rural roads and a strained highway interchange serving the **Rickenbacker International Airport** area are likely to become increasingly clogged as shipping commerce in the area grows. Without improvements, the dream of a regional logistics hub south of Columbus would find itself bogged down by traffic jams in the area, said Nathan Green, economic director of the Pickaway Progress Partnership, an agency that promotes economic development in the county south of Rickenbacker.

To help ease the expected traffic crunch, Green is helping spearhead an initiative to construct a high-capacity highway to link Route 23 with the sprawling network of distribution centers around Rickenbacker and a **Norfolk Southern Corp.** rail freight yard set to open in early 2008. The route would let trucks bypass narrow country lanes for a more convenient path west, providing an alternative to the busy Alum Creek Drive route north to Interstate 270.

"I really think that in order for the intermodal to be a success and for the economic impact to be realized around it, we need to have that access over to Route 23," Green said.

### Sense of urgency

Hopes for a connector received a boost last month, when U.S. Sen. Sherrod Brown, D-Ohio, attached a \$500,000 earmark for the project to a federal spending bill. The money would help pay for a study on the connector - a step that will project a cost, identify potential rights of way and outline possible routes, Green said. A connector project could include improving an existing road or buying rights of way to pave a thoroughfare, he said.

"We need to get this study done as soon as possible," Green said. "Once we figure out what the alternatives are going to be, we can dedicate corridors to make sure we can put a road there."

One of the most pressing reasons to beef up the area's roads is the planned opening of Norfolk Southern's intermodal terminal - a facility for transferring shipping containers between trains and trucks. The complex is expected to draw as many as 800 trucks a day, which would further clog an already overburdened I-270 interchange at Alum Creek Drive.

More development is expected, too, at the Rickenbacker Global Logistics Park, near the southwest edge of the airport adjacent to the Norfolk Southern yard. The 610-acre industrial park is a joint venture of the **Columbus Regional Airport Authority**, Indianapolis-based **Duke Realty Corp.** and Columbus' **Capitol Square Ltd.**

The alternatives to the Alum Creek exit aren't great, said Robert Lawler, transportation director of the **Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission**.

"If you've ever driven the roads down there, they're basically rural roads," Lawler said. "They're not really designed to handle heavy trucks."

Lawler has identified improvements at the interchange as the greatest roadwork priority in the area, but he and Green agree work should begin soon on improvements to it and a possible Route 23 connector.

"This is not something we'd expect to see next year, but we'd hope (the improvements) could be made in 10 years," Lawler said.

### **Funding concerns**

Green's plan faces many hurdles because political wrangling in Congress could curtail earmarks.

Further, it is unclear how the I-270 improvements or a connector would be funded. The state **Department of Transportation** in November released its biennial business plan, which forecast a \$3.5 billion shortfall through 2015 amid rising construction costs and stagnant funding. The woes at the department have dimmed hopes for state funding for improvements near Rickenbacker, which could cost tens of millions of dollars, Lawler said.

"Based on that business plan, their finances look really tight," he said.

Area planners are working, however, to come up with alternative funding sources, such as tolls to use a new connector road, Lawler said.

With no clear answers about how the roads near Rickenbacker will be fixed, challenges to substantial growth in the area will remain worrisome, said Geoff Manack, a partner with **Hyperlogistics Group Inc.**, a distribution company planning to move its headquarters to Rickenbacker Global Logistics Park in February.

"They think that this is going to be the economic engine of Central Ohio, if not the state, and it's really supposed to put us on the map," he said. "But if they don't solve this problem, it's going to shoot us in the foot."

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