

"Federation Corner" column  
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### **State Needs to Face Fiscal Reality of The ICC**

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Governor Ehrlich and other ICC supporters would like us to believe an ICC is a fore-gone conclusion. The truth is the proposed toll-highway is more in question than ever.

The State of Maryland released a report from the Federal Highway Administration showing the total cost of the proposed ICC, a 6 lane toll-highway from I-270 to Route 1 in Laurel, has risen to \$2.3 billion in 2004 dollars, not including interest and financing costs.

The Governor has never had a plan to pay for an ICC. The price tag proposed is now equal to the Wilson Bridge, the 3rd most expensive highway project in the country. Governor Ehrlich would like to pay 90 percent of the ICC price tag by borrowing the funds and without an increase in revenues.

Over the last few years, the Governor has been able to find only enough funds to start construction on one or two new projects in Montgomery County. Last year, the state could not find the funds for the county's second priority – a grade separated interchange at Randolph Road and Georgia Ave. The interchange would cost about 1% that of the ICC and provide relief to the severe congestion present on both roads. Montgomery County has a large number of similar improvement projects that are needed whether or not the ICC is built. If the State can't find the funds for needed projects in the County, will there be any funds remaining for these other needed projects after making payments on the ICC debt charges? More and more state legislators with an eye on fiscal responsibility are recognizing this, whether they support an ICC or not.

With the release of the Draft Environmental Impact Statement, now is the perfect time to take another look at this. Over zealous ICC supporters need to honestly re-evaluate their position in light of the cost of the proposed ICC. We can't think of a better reason to question whether this is really the right choice for Maryland. The Washington region has an incredible opportunity to embrace a truly progressive transportation future. We can increase people's choices for how they get around and where they live and work. We can revitalize our older communities, and preserve our parks, air and water quality. Not to mention giving Maryland an economic boost along the way. An over-priced, out-dated ICC is standing in the way of this future.

How do we do it? Lots of solutions working together. That means better transit everywhere, more balanced job development in eastern Montgomery County and Prince George's County, improving our existing roads first, and focusing more homes and jobs around transit. Numerous studies show these policies relieve congestion on local roads and highways, reduce commuting times, provide greater access to jobs, and create economic growth, all better than the ICC does.

Now that the cost of an ICC has become unmanageable, it's time to look at the range of solutions that have been there all along.

Unfortunately, the Ehrlich administration has never been interested in considering all the options. First the state defined the study not to meet the needs of our communities, but as a major highway facility, excluding an honest look at a range of viable solutions.

Next they've pushed agencies from the local to federal level into accepting an artificially accelerated timeline—squashing or leaving behind any dissenting opinions.

Finally, a holiday release of the study has further limited input on this project. Public hearings are scheduled just a few days after the New Year on January 4, 5 and 8. The state just conceded that this was a problem by adding a public hearing for January 22 and extended the comment period two weeks. That still leaves three of the four hearings on far too short of a timeline. If you're going to fix a problem, why not fix it entirely? If you can schedule a new hearing and do a mailing on it, why not reschedule them all, giving the public a fair shot?

Residents without a broad-band cable connection need to wait hours or even days to simply look at the study. The more than 1,400 page document is only available for download from the Internet. Those who want to look at it on paper must go to selected libraries, or hope Park and Planning eventually get limited copies that might be loaned. Those who requested a paper copy more than a month ago are still waiting.

Bottom line, the proposed ICC is a misplaced priority. It would bankrupt our state's transportation system for a single Outer Beltway segment. When it comes time to fund critical transit & Metro, repair our roads, make essential highway, and local road improvements we could find our coffers empty—leaving citizens to feel the burden of higher taxes, or cuts to other programs. We need more choices for transportation, not a single project that fails to solve the problem. Now is an excellent opportunity to look at better alternatives!