

"Federation Corner" column  
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### **Our misunderstood and ignored transportation system**

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Over the last week I have received emails concerning both the ICC and the necessity of including transportation as part of the Planning Department's Commercial Centers and Boulevard vision. Both sets of emails emphasize how much transportation is ignored.

The ICC emails started as a result of Richard Parson's recent article in the Sentinel where he contends that the ICC is the greatest thing since sliced bread because it will solve so many transportation problems. Richard is well known for selecting some data that support his pro ICC position and ignoring the data that doesn't support his position.

I have been involved with the ICC studies off and on for over 20 years, including discussions and debates about the ICC with Rich Parson. The studies all indicate that the ICC will reduce the growth in congestion on some roads by such a small amount that drivers will never be able to detect it and will actually increase congestion growth on other roads. All these congestion measures are based upon computer models of future conditions. All the data shows that with or without the ICC congestion in 2030 will be much worse than today, which everyone considers unacceptable.

Although the MCCF opposes the ICC, we have members who support it. One member indicated that if the ICC is not built, then there will be a string of wall-to-wall townhouses that will undoubtedly sprout from I-95 to I-270, adding even more congestion to our roads, our schools, and pollution to our environment. My point to him is that a lot of development will come whether or not the ICC is built. Building the ICC will just encourage more development in existing rural areas. To support the transportation needs from the additional housing, retail, and commercial development, many other transportation projects are needed whether or not the ICC is built.

The problem is that the ICC will consume so much of the state transportation funds that little will remain for other projects. (Some 90% of the transportation funding comes from the state/federal.) There are other projects required to address current congestion and to support traffic from future development. The State Department of Transportation (SDOT) fall presentation to our elected officials highlighted that fact. A number of delegates and senators were upset that SDOT was not proposing construction of projects that had already been completely designed and which elected officials, citizens and business representatives all strongly support. SDOT's answer was that because of funds needed to build the ICC, funds were not available for these other projects.

To address our long term transportation needs, we can only make limited improvements to our roads, largely since most of the county is already developed and there are limited places to put new roads. Sure, we need to widen the few roads where space exists. Since most congestion except on freeways occurs where four-lane and six lane roads cross, that is where our limited resources need to be spent - to add turn lanes and in a number of cases convert them into grade separated interchanges. Because nearly all funding for such improvement comes from the state, funds will not be available, likely until after 2025 when the ICC bonds have been repaid.

Because there are limited road improvements possible, the question then becomes what should our course of action be. Many people, even including Richard Parsons, support the building of transitways like the Bi-county Transitway and Corridor Cities Transitway. While these are needed, they are costly and directly serve

only the few who are within walking distance of the stations. The only other option available is our local bus service. I am a firm believer that much more must be done with bus service which, in my opinion, currently deserves a poor rating at best. There are many changes required to expand and upgrade it to truly be what the public needs in order to be able to address some of our congestion and to support future growth.

The Planning Department is having a number of forums that envision much of the future development occurring in existing commercial centers and along select four-lane and six-lane roads. They however are failing to adequately address the transportation needs that will accompany that future development. As indicated above, some of it can be accommodated with improved intersections and building grade-separated interchanges, but the remainder requires good bus service. What they are failing to address is that the bus improvements must be planned concurrently with land use changes. For buses to operate in a manner needed by the public, the process must include a definition of how the buses will run, where the stations will be, and then how development will occur around the bus stations. This marriage of transit and development can only occur if the Planning Department and Department of Public Works and Transportation, who run the bus service, develop a joint plan with citizens. I have recently been calling for the creation of such a county-wide high level plan. This would be followed by the development of individual sector plans around each bus station and route to develop the details - with the involvement of citizens, developers, and businesses.

In addition to the above bus/land-use plan, the funding must exist to build the road improvements and expand/improve the bus system. Our county and state representatives must come to realize that there are not sufficient funds to build all the desired improvements. Rather, they must make hard choices and set priorities. The decision to support building the ICC was done without making these hard choices. If they had, then I would like to think a majority of them would not support the ICC, since it will take nearly all the funds needed for the large number of other projects. The \$3B needed for the ICC would have paid for the needed bus expansion/improvements, road widening and intersection improvements and build a sizable part of the Bi-County Transitway.