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## Delays, overruns snarl bridges plan

### Work grinds along 5 years into project

BY MARCUS GREEN • [MAGREEN@COURIER-JOURNAL.COM](mailto:MAGREEN@COURIER-JOURNAL.COM) • SEPTEMBER 24, 2008

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### The bridges project

What's been accomplished, what hasn't

#### Done

- U.S. 42 interchange bridge designs chosen
- Design under way for five of the project's six segments
- Architectural studies
- Initial financial plan approved

#### Not done

- Exploratory tunnel
- Major right-of-way purchases
- Construction

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#### FROM START TO ...

Key dates in the decadeslong effort to build new bridges across the Ohio River.

As early as the late 1950s, engineers working for Kentucky and Indiana suggested that consideration should be given to an Ohio River bridge connecting eastern Jefferson County and Clark County, Ind.

By the early 1990s, the states were studying the need for a new bridge across the river.

In 2002, Govs. Paul Patton of Kentucky and Frank O'Bannon of Indiana stood near the banks of the Ohio River and announced their support for new downtown and eastern bridges and a rebuilt Spaghetti Junction in order to improve transportation across the river.

A year later, the Federal Highway Administration approved the plan in a 59-page Record of Decision that allowed the project to proceed.



By Matt Stone, The Courier-Journal

Community Transportation Solutions engineers, from left, Kevin Villier, Sam Raies, Phillip Banton and Paul Hilton were surrounded by materials, plans and diagrams.

Mention the \$4.1 billion plan for two new bridges and a reworked Spaghetti Junction to people in the Louisville area and you're likely to hear variations on, "I won't live long enough to see it."

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Five years ago this month, the Federal Highway Administration gave Kentucky and Indiana permission to start the project, slated then to be finished in 2020 and cost \$2.5 billion.

Since that so-called Record of Decision was approved, \$120 million has been spent: Officials chose the new bridges' styles; engineers began designing roadways; and crews built a new U.S. 42 interchange near the route of the planned bridge in Louisville's East End.

But the purchase of land in the project's path, originally expected to occur from 2004 to 2007, has barely begun. And multiple setbacks have lengthened the Ohio River Bridges Project's finish date and added billions of dollars to its price tag:

In 2006, the Kentucky Transportation Cabinet announced that construction would extend to 2024. Cabinet spokesman Chuck Wolfe said that allows the state to better spread out rising costs.

In 2005 and then again in 2006, project leaders said an initial financial plan would be sent that year to the Federal Highway Administration. But the plan, which must be approved for construction to begin, wasn't submitted until October 2007.

Officials with both states blamed the plan's complexity for the delays. "Kentucky never had to do one of these before, and they're just hard to do," Wolfe said.

Work was supposed to start last year on an exploratory tunnel near Prospect, part of an approach to the eastern bridge. But after bids came in more than 39 percent higher than the state's estimates, officials are considering whether to build an approach on the surface rather than under a historic property -- a move that could result in more delays.

One big issue is the soaring cost of construction materials, which has contributed to a 64 percent increase in the 2003 cost estimate.

But another factor is Kentucky's inability to decide how it's going to cover its \$2.9 billion share of the cost.

"Indiana's ready to go and Kentucky is still trying to work out their political problems that they're having over the funding of the bridge. That's what the holdup is here," said U.S. Rep. Baron Hill, an Indiana Democrat whose district includes Clark County.

That factor is expected to be a contentious part of this fall's 3rd District congressional race in Kentucky between incumbent John Yarmuth and Republican challenger Anne Northup, who helped secure federal funds to get planning started during her tenure in Congress.

### Funding Issues

The Ohio River Bridges Project is being overseen by the two states and the Federal Highway Administration.

Indiana is paying most of its portion -- \$1.1 billion -- from money it raised by leasing a toll road near the Michigan border to a consortium of Australian and Spanish firms.

In Kentucky, "funding has been the issue almost since the day the Record of Decision was signed," said Mike Hancock, the state Transportation Cabinet's chief of staff.

Initially, officials counted on Kentucky's paying its share out of federal gasoline tax revenues the state receives.

But rising costs -- and political debate about use of the gas tax revenues -- have derailed that plan. The administrations of Gov. Steve Beshear and his predecessor, Ernie Fletcher, both have said new sources of money, possibly including tolls, are needed to help pay for the bridges and other large projects.

### Legislative Concern

Rep. Scott Brinkman, R-Louisville, said he thinks state legislators never fully grasped that the bridges project would consume such a huge chunk of the state's federal highway budget.



By Steve Durbin, The Courier-Journal

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"Once the members of the General Assembly realized that was the case and they started seeing the allocations out of the highway plan, then they started getting concerned," he said.

The project needs \$1.4 billion to stay on schedule through 2014, and the state now estimates that more than half -- \$845 million -- must come from innovative sources such as tolls.

"The bridges are still on track to be built, but the General Assembly will have to find ways to pay the \$845 million needed in the next couple of budget cycles," said House Speaker Jody Richards, D-Bowling Green.

Louisville Mayor Jerry Abramson is among those who argue that "an infrastructure authority of some sort with the ability to generate revenue through tolls is our best approach."

But that approach also has met with resistance from some lawmakers, and a measure to create a statewide authority for such work stalled in the Senate during the last session.

Hill, the Indiana congressman, is among those in his state opposed to tolls. In an interview, Hill said he has contacted Beshear's office with a proposal that relies on special bonds and federal credits to cover Kentucky's share.

But Beshear spokesman Jay Blanton said Hill's proposal "may not be realistic at this time" because it is based on using federal dollars -- and the government's highway funds have been falling in recent years.

### **Cost Overruns**

Transportation experts say unrealistic cost estimates and inevitably tight state and federal budgets often lead to cost overruns for large projects -- and delays.

But the 64 percent increase in the Ohio River Bridges Project is higher than most, said Bent Flyvbjerg, a professor at Aalborg University in Denmark and one of the world's leading researchers on "mega" projects, or those that typically cost \$1 billion or more.

Flyvbjerg's research of more than 250 projects worldwide shows that bridges and tunnels typically end up 34 percent over budget, while road ventures have an average cost overrun of 20 percent.

"One clear impact that we see again and again is a lot of instability and disruption around projects like this," said Flyvbjerg, who has not researched the Louisville project in detail. "Once they go over budget, you get a destabilized planning process."

That means, he said, that project planners who should be focused on construction issues instead are distracted by having to find money and handle political controversies.

### **Fodder For Critics**

Some longtime critics of the project who argue that it should be trimmed, or halted, say the rising costs and delays only underscore their arguments.

"We have wasted valuable time, resources and public patience pursuing wrong solutions to some regional travel problems," said Jackie Green, a Louisville cycling advocate who favors increased funding for public transportation instead of new bridges.

River Fields, a conservation group opposing an eastern bridge, has long argued there's not enough money to pay for the project.

"Project proponents early on underestimated what this was going to mean in terms of cost and had no way of knowing what was going to happen to the economy, but it was a bad combination of those two things that has led to this situation," said Robert Griffith, attorney for River Fields.

Others support the plan but want to see aspects of it changed.

A grass-roots group that favors an eastern bridge and recommends "eighty-sixing," or tearing down, a portion of Interstate 64 along Louisville's waterfront and not building a downtown bridge, says its approach would cost about half the \$4.1 billion cost of the bridges project.

"The smaller the project is, the more realistic it is that it can happen, and by building an East End bridge forthright, it will have an immediate economic impact on our region," said J.C. Stites, a Louisville businessman and co-founder of the 8664 group.

An engineer hired by the Build the Bridges Coalition, a group of business, government and labor organizations in favor of the two-bridge project, says the 8664 estimates are unrealistic.

Louisville attorney and coalition chairman Ed Glasscock said critics don't understand that further delays or changes to the project would hurt businesses and industries that are losing valuable time stuck in traffic.

"Quite frankly, if people are not supportive, it's like the (Louisville-Jefferson County) merger -- they didn't have the facts, and when we gave them the facts during the merger campaign then they understood why it was so important for our community," he said.

Meanwhile, businesses and homeowners wait.

In eastern Jefferson County, 38 residences are to be purchased and cleared; 30 businesses near downtown will be relocated. More than 200 more properties are in the project's right of way and will be fully or partially bought out.

Among those waiting for offers is Challenger Lifts, which builds hydraulic lifts for auto-repair shops at its Cabel Street location south of Spaghetti Junction, where Interstates 64, 65 and 71 converge.

The uncertainties make it difficult to decide whether to spend money on the existing location, said Jerry Lentz, the company's chief financial officer.

"The thing that impacts you is if you need to make a major expense investment for repair, for example," he said. As a result, businesses may choose to "inch along without really doing the right fix."

Reporter Marcus Green can be reached at (502) 582-4675.

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**gngjonesen2** wrote:

Replying to jdj766:

Just so you are clear

"Louisville Mayor Jerry Abramson is among those who argue that "an infrastructure authority of some sort with the ability to generate revenue through tolls is our best approach."

Tolls will take more of our money..

You Mayor Jerry honks crack me up!

“  
 Replying to gngjonesen2:  
 “  
 WOW! 120 million dollars and not a dang thing to show!  
 Mayor Jerry wanting to take more of our money. There is  
 a shocker...  
 ”  
 This is at the state level. Just so you are clear.

9/25/2008 12:00:52 AM

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**mattd** wrote:

Supermike, Comparing the MN bridge to Louisville's project is akin to comparing apples to oranges. The MN bridge is approx. 1/5 the size of the Louisville project and is located entirely in one state. I believe Chuck Wolfe was being honest when he said a lot of the delays have to do with the scale of the project. A more accurate comparison would be CA's building of the replacement span for the Eastern section of the S.F.-Oakland Bay bridge. I live here and its taken this most populous and wealthiest of states more than 20 years to start construction and it's still not 1/2 completed. But KY has to get on the ball.

9/24/2008 2:57:37 PM

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**supermike** wrote:

Amen! Kentucky screwed up the whole thing from the beginning by pushing for a downtown bridge. No doubt that Spagetti Junction needs to be re-worked, but the East End Bridge is MORE IMPORTANT! Get it built, THEN start on the downtown stuff. In the time this has been debated and re-debated, they've already re-built that bridge in Minnesota that collapsed. GET ON WITH IT!! Can't Kentucky do ANYTHING without red tape, backdoor payments, lawsuits, and massive delays?! The JFK bridge repainting and arena project were just foreshadowing of what was to come here. And everyone knows that John Yarmuth doesn't want the East-End bridge. Re-elect Northrup and get this project back on it's feet!

9/24/2008 10:12:18 AM

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**TheNakedChef** wrote:

Replying to matty1631:  
The downtown bridge is unneeded and the only people who don't want the east-end bridge are those in the Prospect area that feel they have a right to some degree of seclusion. Get the darn east-end bridge built, alleviate some of the traffic in the downtown artery then look at improving the flow of traffic in spaghetti junction.

*These bridges are a unneeded and mostly unwanted waste of state and federal money.*

9/24/2008 8:42:17 AM

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**matty1631** wrote:

These bridges are a unneeded and mostly unwanted waste of state and federal money.

9/24/2008 8:07:52 AM

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