

U.S. 30 study clears way for upgrade to freeway to begin

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Northeast Indiana business leaders and legislators worked together on the effort to turn U.S. 30 into a free-flowing freeway, which now has the state's approve for a study to start the process.

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The Indiana Department of Transportation will begin a much fought for environmental study needed to turn the U.S. 30 corridor from Valparaiso to the Ohio state line into a free-flowing freeway.

The study, known as a Planning and Environment Linkages study, is a faster process developed under the Trump administration to speed up the permit process.

New roads require full environmental impact studies, but this will be a less extensive one.

"It's fast, it's lots less expensive" than the original \$25 million study that regional business leaders had been advocating for, said Bill Konyha, CEO and president of the Regional Chamber of Northeast Indiana.

"When we developed our legislative agenda during the summer of 2020, the members of the Regional Chamber identified the transition of U.S. 30 from a free-flowing highway into a limited access freeway as the No. 1 transportation issue throughout the region for business retention and attraction efforts," Konyha said in a Feb. 16 announcement.

"Northeast Indiana is the most manufacturing-intensive region in the state and expeditious transport of raw materials, components, and workforce is critical to our economy."

The project is expected to improve safety and advance the economy of the region and the state. According to an INDOT analysis, the transformation will reduce the number of accidents along the corridor by 323 per year, reduce the number of fatalities by four year by year, create 10,000 new jobs and add \$900 million in real personal income growth, according to the announcement.

Konyha expressed gratitude for the efforts of the business community of Northeast Indiana, members of the U.S. 30 Coalition — made up of representatives from counties all along the corridor, including Allen, Whitley and Kosciusko, as well as the cities of Warsaw and Columbia City that use U.S. 30 as their main street — and the members of the legislative delegation representing the 11-county region. He said that this effort was part of the agenda of the Regional Chamber before he joined as the organization’s CEO on Oct. 30, 2017. However, it did not become a legislative priority until January 2020.

According to Konyha, as many as 20 CEOs from the region met with Gov. Eric Holcomb during a business roundtable discussion in July. They emphasized the critical nature of this upgrade and the necessity for it to happen as soon as possible as we considered it to be “critical world class infrastructure.”

Holcomb announced in his January State of the State address that improvements to U.S. 30 would be coming, but did not go into detail.

“The commitment from our Governor and INDOT Commissioner did not happen by accident,” said state Rep. Dave Heine, who along with Sen. Liz Brown coordinated much of this successful process with the Indiana Department of Transportation, Holcomb, the legislative delegation, and the Regional Chamber. “It happened because of the collaboration between our business leaders and our legislators all along the U.S. 30 corridor.”

Dent Johnson, vice president of Do It Best Corp. and chairperson of the Regional Chamber of Northeast Indiana Inc., said in the announcement, “This infrastructure improvement is needed to keep pace with all of the public and private investments being

made to make Northeast Indiana one of the premier regions in our state. We are pleased to see the recent progress on this top priority project for our region. We have long counted on the strong collaboration of the private enterprises, associations, and elected officials in Northeast Indiana to deliver results.”

Major manufacturers such as music and audio retailer Sweetwater, which just passed \$1 billion in sales, in Allen County, Steel Dynamics Inc. in Whitley County and orthopedics makers in Kosciusko County depend on U.S. 30 to get their raw materials in and their products out.

Even counties where U.S. 30 doesn't go through have signed on to the project believing that what's good for manufacturers in the region is good for everyone.

Brown, who many say had a “drop the mic” moment to close the December meeting between INDOT officials, Northeast Indiana stakeholders, business leaders, legislators, local elected officials, LEDOs, local chambers of commerce, the speaker of the House, the lieutenant governor’s office, and others, according to the statement, said, “Indiana may be the Crossroads of the Midwest, but the heart runs through Northeast Indiana, via U.S.30. A freeway on U.S. 30 from the Ohio State Line to SR 49 will allow for exponential economic growth that the community needs.”

House Minority Leader Phil GiaQuinta agreed, saying, “It is a pleasure to see forward movement on this crucial project due in large part to the cooperation between the U.S. 30 Coalition and INDOT. This study is the first step in making U.S. 30 safer and more efficient for Northeast Indiana residents.”

“On behalf of the locally elected officials and representatives that make up the U.S. 30 Coalition, we applaud the decision to initiate a designed solution to improve this critical roadway through our communities,” said Warsaw Mayor Joe Thallemer, president of the U.S. 30 Coalition, said in a separate announcement.

With the Planning and Environment Linkages study, INDOT will examine various options to improve the safety, traffic flow, freight movement and economic development potential of the corridor, including the construction of a freeway. "INDOT has agreed that the study will recognize the importance of U.S. 30 remaining a consistent type of roadway and not a mixture of improvements and it will not be designed to merely examine the quickest or least expensive solution," according to the coalition's announcement.

"We look forward to studying the long-term needs for U.S. 30 and engaging with businesses, local leaders, and communities along the corridor as we consider all options for the future," INDOT Commissioner Joe McGuinness said in the announcement. "The Planning and Environmental Linkage study will take a fresh look at the route and consider community, economic and environmental goals as we evaluate how to best improve safety and mobility on U.S. 30."

With the onset of the study, INDOT agreed to institute a moratorium on j-turns on the U.S. 30 corridor except for the one currently under contract at CR 500E in Whitley County. Any projects that are currently underway on U.S. 30 will not detract from the ultimate purpose of the study, according to the announcement.

Rep. David Heine said in the announcement, "The commitment from our Governor and INDOT Commissioner did not happen by accident. This got done because of the collaboration between our business leaders, our U.S. 30 coalition and our State Representatives and Senators along the corridor. This commitment is great news for economic development in northern Indiana!"

Mayor Ryan Daniel of Columbia City said, "Infrastructure continues to be a primary factor in advancing the economy and growing our skilled workforce. This commitment by INDOT is a significant step forward for our region."

Konyha said that the Regional Chamber was joined by many in support of this project. John Sampson, president and CEO of the Northeast Indiana Regional Partnership said,

“U.S. 30 is a critical lifeline in support of the transportation of goods, services, and the products of one of the most manufacturing-intensive regions in Indiana to a global marketplace. The transformation of this corridor into a freeway is a testament to the unified commitment of the business community leaders across Northeast Indiana to step up to meet the needs for both increased safety and efficiency.”

John Urbahns, president and CEO of Greater Fort Wayne Inc., agreed, saying, “Infrastructure is a major factor when businesses decide where to put down roots. A stronger U.S. 30 means companies can more easily serve a national customer base from right here in Allen County. That makes our community even more attractive as we recruit businesses to grow and add jobs here.”

Konyha emphasized that this is the first critical step in the process and urged vigilance during the study process. The business community advised Holcomb in a letter dated Jan. 18 that, “Members of the private-sector business community, with billions of dollars invested in Northeast Indiana, require this conversion to a limited access freeway and, frankly cannot settle for anything less.”