

Making their exit: Study identifies ideal locations for interchange off I-70

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By Samm Quinn

HANCOCK COUNTY, Ind. – Pegge Althoff knows the drive to the north side of Indianapolis well. She made it every day for more than 25 years.

She can quickly rattle off the place she's most likely to get stuck in traffic: near the Mt. Comfort Road exit on Interstate 70. Any time there was an accident in the area, her commute was delayed by an hour or two.

Every time, as she sat in traffic waiting, she thought another exit between Greenfield and Mt. Comfort would cut down on traffic jams. County Road 200W would be a good spot for one, she always thought.

Engineers that looked at options for additional exits off Interstate 70 in Hancock County agreed: county roads 200W and 600E are the best locations for a new interchange, though constructing one could cost anywhere from \$13 to \$20 million, their study recently found.

Last year, county officials hired HWC Engineering to evaluate the need for a third interstate exit as well as identify potential locations and cost estimates; the firm presented the study to the Hancock County Board of Commissioners this week.

The study, the first step in determining whether an additional exit is needed, considered 10 potential locations east and west of State Road 9 for a third interchange. County roads 200W and 600E are the ideal locations, the study found. Both sites have large plots of undeveloped land that would be attractive to developers looking to build near the exit, should it be constructed, it states.

Building a new exit could be decades away, but now is the time to ensure subdivisions aren't constructed in the locations county officials would consider for an exit, Hancock County Highway engineer Gary Pool told the board. The next steps are to add the study to the county's thoroughfare plan – a blueprint for where future roads will be built – and to contact the Indiana Department of Transportation, which oversees the interstate, to see if the department will support a request for a new interchange, he said.

Currently, the exits onto Mt. Comfort Road and State Road 9 are the only means of entering the county along a roughly 20-mile stretch of I-70. By comparison, Henry County, which has around 50,000 residents – about 22,000 fewer than Hancock County – has three exits from the interstate.

While the area's existing exits are sufficient to handle present-day traffic, as the county's population and business base grow, building a third exit might be necessary, officials say.

INDOT counts show more than 7,500 drivers use the State Road 9 exit off I-70 eastbound daily. Some 13,000 drivers get off eastbound I-70 at Mt. Comfort Road, 10 percent more than used the exit in 2015, the data shows.

With that growth in mind, county officials commissioned the study last year to analyze current traffic patterns, population and business development throughout the county.

It's unlikely the current growth in the county – the Indiana Business Research Center estimates the population will grow to about 92,000 by 2030 – can be accommodated by only two interchanges, the study states.

The study analyzed county roads 400W, 300W, 200W and 100W as well as 400E, 450E, 500E, 600E, 700E and 850E to determine which roads could best accommodate an interstate exit.

County Road 200W is ideal because it's halfway between Mt. Comfort Road and State Road 9, and the road leads drivers to Philadelphia and Fortville, the study states. An interchange at that location would also provide alternative routes for Greenfield residents and truck traffic, which might alleviate some traffic congestion on State Road 9 through downtown Greenfield, the study states.

County Road 600E connects to State Road 234 and U.S. 40, and an exit there would provide alternative routes for citizens to use, according to the engineers.

The cost to build either interchange is extensive, the study shows. Engineers estimated building an exit at County Road 200W would cost about \$13.7 million; an interchange at County Road 600E would be even higher at about \$20.3 million.

County officials have said they would rely on state and federal funding to help pay for the project.

Nathan Riggs, information director for the Indiana Department of Transportation, said the department regularly seeks input from local governments and stakeholders about ways to would improve safety, mobility and economic growth in Indiana. Constructing a new exit would require participation from multiple agencies, including the Federal Highway Administration, INDOT, local governments and the area's Metropolitan Planning Organization.

The department already plans to update its statewide interchange planning study to analyze potential new interstate exits across the state, though officials haven't determined potential locations yet, he said.

Although Althoff no longer has to drive on I-70 daily – she retired late last year – she's happy to hear officials are beginning to investigate adding another exit. There will always be commuters who suffer through traffic jams.

“I’ve said we’ve needed one, even two, for years,” she said. “It would alleviate some of the congestion.”