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FOR PUBLIC POLICY

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April 12, 2017

Allegheny Institute Op-Ed

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555 Words

## **Mon-Fayette Expressway no highway of dreams**

**By Colin McNickle**

"If you build it, he will come," the ghostly voice told the fictional Ray Kinsella in 1989's movie classic "Field of Dreams." Change "he" to "they" and you'll find the nebulous rationale too often employed to justify the building of new toll highways in Pennsylvania.

The latest folly that comes to mind is the apparently scuttled 14-mile Route 43 toll road from Route 51 at Jefferson to Interstate 376 at Monroeville, the northernmost leg of the Mon-Fayette Expressway.

The Southwest Pennsylvania Commission (SPC) voted last month to table the \$2 billion extension on a highway that, if fully completed, would link I-376 to I-68 in West Virginia. A day later, on March 21, the Pennsylvania Turnpike Commission halted engineering-design activities.

As Jake Haulk, president of the Allegheny Institute for Public Policy, reminds (*in Policy Brief Vol. 17, No. 17*), the expressway extension faced growing reservations from planners and pols alike.

The former found the 20-year completion time frame inimical to more immediate transportation needs; the latter were struck by, on prior toll road projects, the disparity between pre-construction use forecasts and the lack of usage once built, the Ph.D. economist says.

But what Haulk finds quite troubling was supporters' use of a study by TRIP, a national transportation research group, that blindly touted the virtues of the expressway's northern extension.

"It is long on claims but short on useful data and analysis," Haulk says.

Among the TRIP study's deficiencies:

- No data indicating current traffic patterns in the region by type, volumes or how much is through traffic or locally generated;

-- No comparative analyses gauging utilization and effects of similar toll road extensions, such as the existing legs of the Mon-Fayette Expressway, Westmoreland County's Route 66 and the Beaver Valley Expressway;

-- No analysis of the types of industries that might come to or expand in the area of the expressway's Monroeville extension.

"But even more problematic for the study's usefulness is the methodology used to project the number of jobs that will develop in the area as a result of the extension's construction," Haulk says.

Not only does the TRIP study appear to misrepresent another study's supposed existing business and jobs claims, Haulk says TRIP used old statistics and a dubious formula to project future jobs.

"Briefly stated, the TRIP employment estimates are sorely lacking in methodology and rigor," the think tank president says.

Haulk says whatever the merits of the Mon-Fayette Expressway extension from Route 51 to Monroeville might be, the TRIP study has provided no convincing evidence or reporting that would warrant spending many years and billions of dollars to build it.

"This is even more the case if there are efficient and less costly ways to improve transportation through widening existing key routes, traffic pattern improvements, enhancing connectivity with existing major regional arteries and setting up more usable mass transit to serve locally within the area," Haulk says.

"Putting all the eggs in the (expressway) basket is likely to be disappointing and could preclude efforts to fix urgent needs," he says.

Put another way, the extension would be no highway of dreams, very likely resulting in more pain than gain.

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