

BOOM GOES WILL COUNTY

Southwest suburban growth poised for takeoff when I-355 extension opens Nov. 11

Cathy Boo knows her days living on the land chosen by her ancestors are numbered, 140 years after they settled on the Homer Township farmstead that her 18-year-old son now helps tend.

Standing on high ground, with an oddly petlike steer nuzzling her, she gazes over rows of corn and open land to see work trucks zipping along the nearly complete extension of Interstate Highway 355.

The toll road, slated for grand opening events Nov. 11, will cement the status of largely rural Will County as another sprawling suburban region -- just as the first portion of the road, completed in late 1989, altered DuPage County. Officials predict it will attract retail malls that could transform New Lenox into "the Schaumburg" of the southwest suburbs.

"We've always known it's coming," said Boo, 45, recalling when her family attended a meeting in the 1960s to discuss plans for the highway. "This area will be changed forever."

For Boo, the \$730 million, 12.5-mile ribbon of concrete snaking its way from Interstate Highway 55 in Bolingbrook to Interstate Highway 80 in New Lenox is life-altering, just as it is for thousands of others in many different ways.

Traffic on roads with interchanges will double immediately, planners say. Swarming developers are proposing millions of feet of retail and commercial space -- even a Bo Jackson sports dome. Rapid residential growth, mostly confined now to northern Will, is expected to move south into bucolic communities because commuters will have easier access to regional work centers.

Meanwhile, thousands of folks will find their way to work, or perhaps mom's house, far more quickly. Others will find the visual landscape and sound contours of their daily lives changed.

"There's no more view," Renee Gustafson said as she gazed out a second-floor bedroom window at a dollar sign looming over the toll road, which runs behind a sound wall in her back yard. "You could see the deer and everything there."

Gustafson, 43, and her husband, Ronald, bought their home in Lockport's Parker Ridge subdivision in 1999. The builders told them the toll road was coming, but they hoped to have moved on before it arrived.

"There are pros and cons to it," she said. "The pros are the new businesses coming to the area. The cons are the noise."

She noted it will be much easier to get to her job as a police officer at a Near West Side veterans hospital near the Eisenhower Expressway.

Illinois State Toll Highway Authority officials say the extension will shave an average of 20 percent off travel times for people heading north and south in the region.

"My mom lives in New Lenox," said Thomas Cuculich, a former toll agency executive. "It's going to cut a half-hour off my trip."

Toll agency and municipal officials cite the economic benefits, noting highway interchanges attract significant commercial development that lowers residential tax burdens while providing jobs.

In Lockport, New Lenox and other towns along the extension, developers have proposed building more than 3 million square feet of retail space and larger amounts of office, warehouse and industrial space.

Economic development officials also expect more than 20,000 acres of housing to sprout up in the corridor, but they said builders are holding off during the current difficult market.

"It's just going to accentuate the development pattern that has been going on for some time," said Curt Paddock, director of land use for Will County. "It will certainly enhance what has been taking place for the past 10 years."

Will County, which saw its population grow to more than 668,000 in 2006 from slightly more than 500,000 in 2000, is the 83rd fastest growing county in the nation, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. By 2030, more than 1 million people will live in Will, eclipsing DuPage as the state's second-most populated county, according to projections by the former Northeastern Illinois Planning Commission.

The county's links to Interstates 80 and 55, along with relatively inexpensive land costs, have fueled much of the growth. The I-355 extension will link those highways by cutting a swath through eastern and central parts of the county, slicing a corner of Lemont in Cook County along the way.

To see how much the communities lining the corridor will change, one need only look across the northern border of Will, into DuPage County.

"I-355 had a huge impact on economic development for DuPage County," said Cuculich, DuPage's director of economic development and planning and onetime executive director of the toll agency. "It really made us have a great jump in our economic development and our job creation. It also helped reinvigorate the Interstate 88 corridor."

DuPage now has more than 130 corporate headquarters, and more people enter the county each day to work than leave it, Cuculich said.

Extending I-355 will enhance the benefits, he added. "Anyone who has a retail center that is easier to access will see an increase in customers," he said.

More than 160 commercial buildings, comprising more than 14.1 million square feet of space, have sprouted up within a half-mile of the I-355 corridor in DuPage since 1991, according to county statistics. Addison, Bolingbrook, Downers Grove, Itasca, Lombard and Woodridge all saw new construction, the statistics show.

The biggest anticipated beneficiary in Will County is New Lenox, where the population is expected to grow from about 24,000 to more than 90,000 in the next 23 years. Will officials said it could become "the Schaumburg" of the southwest suburbs, in part because of two proposed malls that would start with 2.5 million square feet of space.

"Those projects could easily get to 3 [million] or 4 million square feet of retail over the next 10 to 12 years," said John Greuling, president and CEO of the Will County Center for Economic Development.

New Lenox is considering enacting a 1 percent sales tax on the malls and surrounding retail operations, in part to fund \$35 million in bonds to upgrade nearby roads and keep traffic flowing. As much as \$50 million in road and other improvements will be needed, said Village Administrator Russ Loebe.

Mayor Tim Baldermann said he expects traffic on nearby Cedar Road to more than double to 25,000 cars daily, from 12,000, the day the extension opens.

Will County Engineer Sheldon Latz said traffic will about double on all four thoroughfares with extension interchanges. The toll agency widened those roads no more than a half-mile in each direction, leaving further upgrades to local, county, state and federal officials.

"I think the feeder roads coming into the interchanges are going to have to be upgraded from two lanes to four lanes within at least a couple miles of the interchanges," Latz said. "I think you are going to see some congestion."

The other community fielding massive development proposals is Lockport, where former professional football and baseball player Bo Jackson won approval to build an 88,000-square-foot sports dome southeast of Division Street and the extension.

Lockport also expects to see about 600,000 square feet of new retail space southwest of the extension and 159th Street, but other proposals in that city are proving controversial. They include three warehouse and distribution facilities that would spread over more than 630 acres and include hundreds of truck docks near interchanges at 143rd and 159th Streets.

Last week, the city's Plan Commission recommended rejecting the largest of the proposals, but two covering 326 acres are in keeping with annexation agreements and have been approved in concept by the City Council, Mayor Tim Murphy said. One developer contributed \$3.5 million to sewer upgrades, he said.

Mayor Jim Daley of adjacent Homer Glen, a 6-year-old village with a slogan of "Community and nature ... in harmony," takes issue with Lockport's approval of the concept of a 288-acre office, distribution and warehouse park on 143rd Street with as many as 631 truck docks.

Homer Glen so far has seen relatively modest retail proposals near extension interchanges. "We are trying to maintain a semirural community," Daley said.

Lockport officials "are trying to make it a truck stop. We don't agree with that, and neither do their own people."

Murphy said the "vision" in each community differs markedly, and he chafed at the idea that the 143rd Street development would be second-rate. "This is going to be a high-end business park, not a trucking facility," he said. "The idea that trucks are going to be tooling around Homer Glen or the city of Lockport is ludicrous."

Among those critical of Lockport's plans is Boo, who is speaking out at meetings while doing all she can to preserve some of her heritage.

Her great-grandparents Mary and John Kolar came to the area from Bohemia via Quebec in 1867.

Boo plans to sell 13 wooded acres of her 58-acre plot to the Forest Preserve District for \$1.2 million. "My great-grandchildren can come and play in it in 100 years," she said.

About 20 years ago, 40 acres were sold to Boo's cousin, and a developer who bought it from him sold it to the district for the Fiddyment Creek preserve, which will include Boo's 13 acres.

Boo loves the land, with buildings built by ancestors; crops of wheat, soybeans and hay; and a seeming menagerie of beloved animals, including chickens and geese, sheep and goats, horses and cows -- and a llama.

She said she hopes to stay five more years, until her daughter graduates from high school, but doesn't know if it's in the cards, with traffic, bright lights and construction at her doorstep.

"I wonder if we'll make it. I really do."

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Veterans Memorial Tollway trivia

*More than 50,000 vehicles are expected to use the extension on opening day.

*The Des Plaines River Valley Bridge is 1.3 miles long and 125 feet wide, making it the longest bridge in the state's toll road system and the second longest bridge in Illinois.

*The amount of concrete used to build the extension is 410,000 cubic yards -- enough to build 1,000 miles of sidewalk.

*About 270,000 tons of steel were used -- enough to make about 9,600 sport-utility vehicles.

*Workers moved 10.2 million cubic yards of dirt, which would fill U.S. Cellular Field and Wrigley Field seven times over.

*It took 90,000 gallons of paint to put down stripes.

*More than 3,000 workers helped build the extension.

Source: Illinois State Toll Highway Authority

hdardick@tribune.com

Credit: By Hal Dardick, Tribune staff reporter