

Thruway planning is paved with concerns

By Nicole Fay Barr

Many people turned out Tuesday night to hear about the Thruway Authority's plans to reconstruct the highway between exits 23 and 24. Residents, mostly from Guilderland, aired their concerns about increased noise, dust, pollution, and traffic.

"We're very concerned in McKownville about the project," said Don Reeb, president of the McKownville Improvement Association.

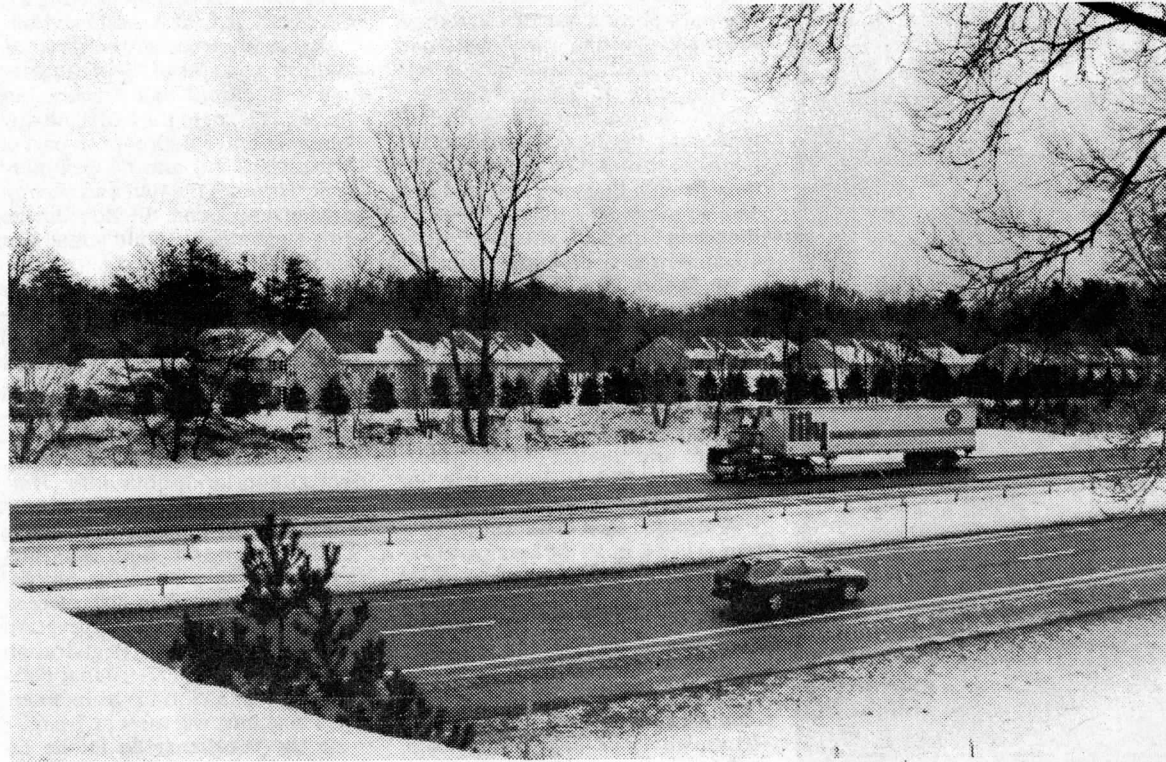
In the preliminary draft of the environmental impact statement, he said, it states that no impacts to the community are anticipated. That statement is poetic, Reeb said, "and not at all accurate."

Thruway representatives made a formal presentation in one room and then listened to speakers, but did not comment. In an adjoining room, at Saint Sophia's Orthodox Church in Albany, engineers stood by with posters of proposed designs and answered some questions.

The meeting was held as part of the project's scoping session, in its environmental impact statement. This is required for the Thruway Authority to complete its State Environmental Quality Review.

About 100 people attended the meeting, including a civil-engineering class from Union College and a television news reporter and cameraman. Thruway officials told the group that this was a very important meeting for public input.

Lee Ecker, of Clough, Harbour, & Associates, an engineering firm, told the crowd about the plans for reconstructing the Thruway between exits 23 and 24.



Many concerns: Guilderland residents asked questions and expressed worries this week at a public meeting about the Thruway's plans to reconstruct the highway between exits 23 and 24. That part of the highway, pictured above, runs through McKownville.

Environmental issues to be investigated include air quality, cultural resources, ecology, noise, wetlands, and surface-water quality, he said.

The Thruway Authority is also considering making "vertical clearance improvements" between exits 23 and 24, Ecker said. That is, the road under overpasses will be lowered to give trucks and other large vehicles higher clearance.

For this project, a draft of the

windows closed....I saw nothing in your draft statement that would lead me to believe you'll handle dust."

Reeb also asked how traffic tie-ups will be controlled at exits 23 and 24 during construction.

Others said that adding another lane will increase the exhaust, noise, and congestion between exits 23 and 24. They asked for sound barriers.

Three of the 16 speakers voiced their support for alterna-

the backyards of many McKownville residents.

For Exit 24 in McKownville, which links traffic from the Thruway to the Northway, to Interstate 90, or to Western Avenue in Guilderland, four proposals have been discussed; these were narrowed from 15 ideas. All four proposals would expand the toll plaza and move the Thruway ramps further west.

One proposal is to simply move the Thruway ramps west

E-ZPass is a system where drivers attach an electronic device to their windshields. The device is scanned as the vehicle goes through entrance and exit tollbooths on the Thruway. The driver only has to slow down to pass through the tollbooth and is billed monthly for the toll charges.

One of these three concepts is called the "flyover concept." However, all three involve some type of extra flyover ramp in McKownville, to which residents have voiced opposition and have drafted their own ideas.

At Tuesday's meeting, some speakers said they hope this project does not block alternative improvements from being made.

"I'm very concerned with the possibility of a flyover," Doug Smith said. "I wouldn't want to see this project paving the way for it."

Smith lives on McKown Road and is a member of the McKownville Improvement Association. In September, the improvement association submitted its own traffic plans to the Thruway Authority.

The plans include eliminating tolls at exits 23 and 24, which would keep traffic flowing faster and eliminate the need for a flyover. Reeb said Tuesday that the Thruway Authority should seriously think about this. If tolls at exits 23 and 24 are eliminated now, he said, traffic won't be as bad during the reconstruction of the mainline.

The Thruway Authority issued requests for proposals for ideas on how to collect tolls in the future, officials said. The results of that study will help influence projects to improve various exits, they said, and no decisions — on

The Enterprise — Nicole Fay Barr

plans for reconstructing the Thruway between exits 23 and 24.

trucks and other large vehicles higher clearance.

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The pavement on that six miles of highway is going to be rebuilt, he said. The road is over 50 years old and is handling increasing traffic loads, he said. Repaving the road is no longer effective, he said.

The highway's drainage facilities will also be reconstructed.

The Thruway Authority has been considering "alternatives of mobility," to lessen traffic volume on the highway, Ecker said.

The first alternative is transportation-systems management or TSM. This can include installing message signs or improving the timing of traffic signals at intersections, he said.

Next is transportation-demands management or TDM. This is the act of trying to decrease the number of trips vehicles take on the highway, by, for example, increasing carpooling.

The TSM and TDM options will be explored further as the Thruway Authority completes its environmental impact statement, Ecker said.

The Thruway Authority is also considering putting in additional travel lanes. These can be general-use lanes, high-occupancy vehicle lanes, or lanes that cost drivers extra to use, Ecker said.

environmental impact statement is expected to be complete by the fall of 2005 and a public hearing will be held in late 2005 or early 2006.

The final environmental impact statement should be complete in 2006, Ecker said. A detailed design of the project will be done by 2007. Then, construction should begin in 2008 and end in 2009.

Public comments

At Tuesday's meeting, 16 residents spoke. Each had to fill out a form to speak; they were called up front in the order the forms were handed in. Thruway officials did not respond to the speakers; they were just listening to the comments at this point, they said.

Reeb and several other speakers asked how the Thruway will handle the noise from the construction of the project and afterwards.

Reeb also said that dust and dirt from the Thruway has not been addressed.

"People in McKownville can't open their windows because of the noise, fly ash, and traffic ash," Reeb said. "They are trapped in their homes with the

asked for sound barriers.

Three of the 16 speakers voiced their support for alternative means of transportation, such as walking and biking.

Lindsay Childs, of the Guilderland Pathways Committee, asked the Thruway Authority to consider putting a bike path along the south side of the Thruway. People can ride their bikes to work, rather than drive cars, Childs said.

"The Thruway has said this is illegal," Childs said. "It's not illegal; it's been done all over the country. I'll give you a list in writing."

While a bike path on the Thruway might not sound like a good idea now, Childs said, he urged the representatives to think about it when reconstructing the highway. Work can be done on the road now that would allow a bike path in the future, even if it's not desired now, he said.

Other projects

The Thruway Authority began developing ways to improve the highway between exits 21A and 25A in 2003. This project, called the Albany Corridor study, should be complete by the spring and will be available to the public then, officials said.

Members of the McKownville Improvement Association and other Guilderland residents have been vocal about their concerns with Thruway improvements from the beginning. The Thruway runs virtually through

ramps further west.

One proposal is to simply move the Thruway ramps west of Rapp Road. The other three proposals involve creating separate E-ZPass ramps.

that study will help influence projects to improve various exits, they said, and no decisions — on the flyover or otherwise — will be made until that study is complete.

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