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Waiting for a sensible transportation plan

The Indiana Commerce Connector, those 75 miles of concrete through the Indiana countryside, was announced with great fanfare at the start of the 2007 legislative session and recently disappeared with equal aplomb. Thanks to the efforts of state Rep. Terri Austin, chairwoman of the House Roads and Transportation Committee, and the other members of that committee, the citizens of Indiana had ample opportunity to express their opinions on Indiana's transportation needs.

While the governor's specific proposals for the Indiana Commerce Connector and Illiana Expressway did not enjoy widespread support, they did successfully engage the public in a debate about the transportation needs of the central Indiana region, as well as for the entire state. The public interest in engaging in a substantive discussion offers the governor and his staff an opportunity to nurture and develop a comprehensive transportation plan for Indiana.

More than five years ago, the Metropolitan Planning Organization began to assess and identify mass-transit solutions to the region's deteriorating air quality and congested transportation infrastructure. The challenges of more cars, SUVs, semis and motorcycles—coupled with increasing commute times, rising gas prices and higher levels of emissions—are all sympto-



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Commentary

matic of a region that lacks an efficient transportation system. For example, in 2004, the Environmental Protection Agency classified the nine-county area including Boone, Hamilton, Hancock, Hendricks, Johnson, Madison, Marion, Morgan and Shelby as non-attainment for ground-level pollutant ozone. In 2005, the EPA classified Hamilton, Hendricks, Johnson, Marion and Morgan counties as non-attainment for fine particulate matter.

As a non-attainment area, we're harming the physical health of our citizens and the financial health of our corporations. Businesses looking to move and expand in central Indiana want to ensure that their work force can get to and from the office, safely and on time. Multi-modal transit is about safely connecting the planes, trains, automobiles, bikes and feet that facilitate the free flow of ideas, commerce and capital. Efficient, environmentally sensitive transportation contributes to an atmosphere where the focus can be on creating enterprise value.

A recent survey by the U.S. Public Interest Research Group found that Indiana ranked first in the nation in carbon dioxide emissions from coal, sixth in the nation for the biggest increase in carbon dioxide emissions from 1960 to 2001 and seventh in emissions of carbon dioxide from fossil fuel combustion. It would be reasonable to infer that leading the nation in these emissions categories, Indiana would be a leader in population and economic growth. Unfortunately that is not the case, as Indiana ranks 15th in population and 28th in gross domestic product out of the 50 states.

The Indiana Commerce Connector and Illiana Expressway did not address the fundamental problems associated with transportation in Indiana. Numerous studies conducted by multiple groups over the years have validated the need for a multi-modal transit system.

The governor has facilitated the growth of the ethanol industry in Indiana. However, rising corn and land prices will make it tougher for producers to turn a profit with bankers and industry executives already expecting an industry shakeout. He should be facilitating an integrated state and federal discussion on how Indiana can lead the nation in implementing sustainable economic and environmental policies.

The state and municipalities need to embrace development policies that encourage sensible development, population density, and the space and infrastructure to support transportation alternatives. The federal government needs to be encouraged to direct sufficient resources away from roads and airports to integrated multi-modal transportation efforts.

Gov. Daniels is uniquely positioned as a former Office of Management and Budget director to mobilize state and federal resources and attention to this pressing need and to position Indiana as a leader in lowering emissions, developing indigenous fuel sources and providing its citizens with the world's most environmentally responsible and economically efficient transportation system. •

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