



COUNCIL OF GOVERNMENTS

February 4, 2005

Hon. Timothy F. Hagan, President  
Cuyahoga County Board of Commissioners  
1219 Ontario Street  
Cleveland, OH 44113

Hon. Jimmie Dimora, Vice President  
Cuyahoga County Board of Commissioners  
1219 Ontario Street  
Cleveland, OH 44113

Hon. Peter Lawson Jones, Commissioner  
Cuyahoga County Board of Commissioners  
1219 Ontario Street  
Cleveland, OH 44113

Hon. Thomas J. Longo, President  
Cuyahoga County Mayors & Managers  
Association  
5407 Turney Road  
Garfield Heights, OH 44125

RE: Proposed Avon / I-90 Interchange and Need  
For Discussion of Regional "Big Picture"

Dear Gentlemen:

Greetings. The mayors representing our fifteen FSC member-cities have asked me to communicate the views expressed in this letter.

Steps are underway to build a new interchange on Interstate 90 in the city of Avon, Lorain County. The initiative raises, again, the issue of how highways in Greater Cleveland affect tax bases and conditions in local communities. We say "again" because the same issue came up in 1998 when proposals to widen I-71 and I-90 were before the NOACA board. Some facts:

- The initiative to build the Avon interchange is being led by the city's elected officials and by real estate developers; it is not being led by highway engineers who, on the basis of traffic analysis, have yet to determine the need for an interchange.
- There are two I-90 interchanges in Avon, one roughly in the center of the city (at Rt. 83), and the other in the western half of the city (Rt. 611). Avon's eastern half of I-90, approximately 2-1/2 miles, has no interchange. That is where the new one would be located. Within those 2-1/2 miles lay extensive amounts of vacant land. The primary purpose of the new interchange is to promote development of that land.

- The Cleveland Clinic has announced that it will locate a major facility in Avon and vacate its Westlake site if the interchange is built.
- Avon has been actively developing for 20 years - the result of I-90 and the city's adjacency to Cuyahoga County. Avon is the "next ring out" from the built-out western suburbs of Cuyahoga County. Two-thirds of Avon homebuyers in recent years have been movers from Cuyahoga, mostly from the suburbs of Westlake, Lakewood, North Olmsted, Bay Village, Rocky River and Fairview Park.
- While Avon is growing, Cuyahoga County's population is declining - and the region as a whole is stagnant, as it has been for 30 years. But Avon and other "outer" places such as Brunswick, Medina, Hudson, Twinsburg and numerous townships are growing because of movement by residents and employers from other parts of the region, primarily Cuyahoga County.
- Although the region has not grown for 30 years, highways have enabled development to extend outward into rural areas, facilitating moves by residents and employers from "old" inner communities (that do not have farms for development), leaving those places to suffer the consequences of aged and obsolete real estate. Highway "enhancements," such as widenings and new interchanges, have aided movement. The consequences have not been exclusively in Cuyahoga County. Lake County's western communities and the cities of Lorain and Elyria have been similarly affected.
- The new interchange will expand Avon's tax base (it also will bless landowners with a capital gains windfall) but it will not strengthen the economy of the region. It will weaken Cuyahoga County and segments of Lorain County (such as Midway Mall in Elyria) when new retail establishments open. (See attached graphics which show changes in property values across the region.)
- NOACA, whose approval will be required to build the interchange, has as one of its goals: "Provide additional transportation system capacity to move people and goods only when such capacity improvements *promote the NOACA principles*, minimizing the adverse impacts of the investments on existing communities within the region."  
(NOACA's principles *emphasize minimizing adverse impacts of transportation investments on existing communities, the environment, land use, and agricultural lands.*)

The formal request for the interchange has yet to be submitted to NOACA. When it is, we expect it to receive thorough review and critical examination. We also expect it to be approved.

Avon officials can take the position: "You [NOACA] said 'yes' to Medina on I-71, 'yes' to Lorain County on I-90, and 'yes' to Mentor on the 615 interchange. How can you say 'no' to us? Besides, look at all the highway investment that is going into the urban core. Cleveland will be getting a billion dollars for its Innerbelt and Shoreway projects. Isn't that minimizing adverse impacts? All we're requesting is \$20 million. And how would not building our interchange, which means a great deal to us, make much difference for Cleveland, Lakewood or any other community? People and businesses are going to move anyway. We are not forcing them to leave Cuyahoga County; they are doing it because they want to."

We expect a majority of the NOACA board will agree, concluding that in the big picture, another interchange will make little difference.

It is the big picture that concerns us. The Avons and townships in the adjacent counties have hundreds of thousands of acres of farmland ready for development, all within short or modest distance of existing interchanges. The “pulling power” of that land and those interchanges, coupled with the fact that NOACA has no authority over local land-use decisions, means that the agency’s goals and principles are largely impractical.

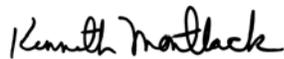
Thus, as things stand, we believe:

- Development in the counties adjacent to Cuyahoga will continue just as it has been occurring, with or without a new Avon interchange.
- Cuyahoga County will increasingly lose residents and employers to those developments, and continue to decline (as will western Lake County and parts of Lorain County).
- NOACA’s effect on the situation is marginal, at best.

It is apparent that NOACA can do little to change the situation. But regional dispersion of development has reached such a severe point that focused discussion is called for: *In the face of unrestrained farmland development and consequent movement, what will it take to reverse Cuyahoga County’s decline and strengthen the region’s mature communities?*

We propose that Cuyahoga County officials initiate discussion with the executive committee of the NOACA board to consider the situation and possible courses of action.

Yours truly,



Kenneth Montlack, Chair  
First Suburbs Consortium

cc: Cuyahoga County Mayors and Managers Association c/o Lisa Barno, Executive Director;  
First Suburbs Consortium Mayors and Governing Board Members

attachments