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# METRO

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THE PLAIN DEALER

## ODOT plan leads to 'trench' warfare

### MidTown fights Inner Belt project

JAMES EWINGER  
AND TOM BRACKENRIDGE  
*Plain Dealer Reporters*

Bone-crunching crashes give Cleveland's Inner Belt its reputation and nickname, Dead Man's Curve, but the latest collision on the highway is between the engi-

neers who want to rebuild it for safety and the business owners who fear shutting access ramps will shut them down.

At issue is "the trench" — the main artery for the network of expressways that pulse through the city's core and join it to the region.

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The Ohio Department of Transportation plans to reconfigure the trench, closing some entry and exit ramps. Engineers say they will smooth traffic flow, make the road abundantly safer and do no significant harm.

But business interests, mainly

east of downtown, say the harm will be profound. They're taking their case to Mayor Frank Jackson, whose support for the project is critical.

Advocates for MidTown Cleveland Inc. charge that ODOT's emphasis is on smoothing traffic through the city, at the expense of downtown. The plan will cause unacceptable delays at intersections, they say, backing up traffic on nearby streets and

driving away businesses.

ODOT's response is that MidTown's criticism is misguided and that the group has offered no alternative.

"I think they've exhausted their efforts to find an alternative," said Craig Hebebrand, the ODOT engineer in charge of the Inner Belt project. "They've spent the last six months looking for it and hired two consultants."

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# ODOT

FROM B1

## Critics blast state's plan for 'the trench'

That's not our job, said Tom Bier, a professor of urban planning at Cleveland State University and one of MidTown's most vocal advocates.

ODOT wants to close the Lakeside, St. Clair, Prospect and Carnegie ramps, because it says the trench has the highest accident rate in Ohio.

## MidTown pushes for marginal roads

Yet, James Haviland, MidTown's executive director, says the group has alternatives that its own experts say will work but that ODOT chooses to ignore. The main one involves placing marginal roads above the trench at surface level. These would receive traffic from the trench and allow drivers to turn onto any of the east-west streets webbing their way across the trench now.

ODOT's plan also uses a marginal-road system, which is satisfactory to Cleveland State University, one of the largest institutions in the affected neighborhoods.

ODOT's critics — with MidTown the most vocal among them — accuse the state agency of refusing to bargain in good faith, to change or adapt to the neighborhoods' needs.

And influential businesses, including the Cleveland Clinic and Cleveland Indians, join MidTown in criticizing what they see as the end of vital access with the proposed closing of ramps to the trench at Carnegie and Prospect.

Hebebrand says ODOT already has responded by adding:

- A two-way frontage road between Chester and Cedar.

- An extension of East 30th Street, serving as a two-way frontage road between St. Clair Avenue and Hamilton Avenue.

- Ramps between Superior Avenue and Chester Avenue.

It also replaced direct access to Payne Avenue with indirect access via East 24th and East 30th streets — similar to the existing access points.

Construction on the trench is expected to begin in 2012, ODOT spokeswoman Lora Hummer said. Early work will focus on rebuilding local streets and railroads over the interstate. Work on the interstate itself is supposed to begin around 2015 with the whole project completed by 2018. Total cost for the trench portion is projected to be about \$123 million.

Construction may be far off, but ODOT hopes to culminate years of planning within the next year, when it is scheduled to submit a comprehensive project-impact document for federal approval.

Bier describes MidTown's current efforts as an 11th-hour push. "I think it's the 58th minute of the 11th hour," he said.

Bier says Mayor Jackson is the key. He gave a tentative blessing to the project last year. Local officials from the county commissioners on down say it's the mayor's call and his voice is the one ODOT will heed.

Bob Brown, Cleveland's planning director, said the city has reserved final approval until

ODOT completes detailed traffic studies.

"If traffic models show it flows smoothly, it should be OK, but that's a big if," Brown said.

## Results of study show gridlocks

MidTown says its own study shows unacceptable delays at 14 intersections, and member businesses complain that the state plan will inhibit the flow of clients and employees.

Jim Folk, vice president of the Indians' ballpark operations, said ODOT's design creates "serious problems" for businesses in the Midtown and Gateway areas.

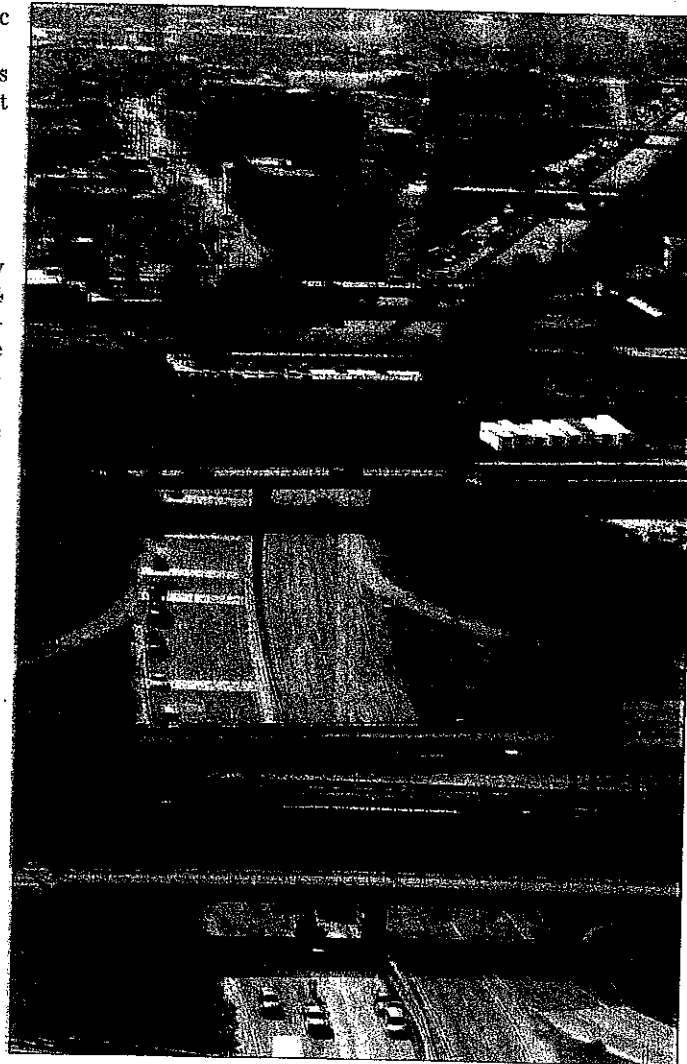
"The inability to provide easy, direct access between the trench and Gateway . . . can seriously impact [fans'] desire to attend events," Folk said.

The Cleveland Clinic, which plans a 4,000-car parking garage on Carnegie and a grand campus entrance off Chester, also has doubts about ODOT's plan.

It has the potential to hurt access to the Clinic from the west and the south, Clinic spokeswoman Michelle Bolek said in an e-mail.

A top officer with Applied Industrial Technologies Inc. — with 325 workers, the industrial-parts distributor is Midtown's largest employer — said ODOT's plan would gridlock Chester Avenue just north of AIT's headquarters.

"If this goes through, we will be looking at other locations," said Michael Cotiechia, chairman of the board at MidTown and AIT's chief administrative officer. "It's not a bluff."



PLAIN DEALER FILE PHOTOGRAPH

The so-called "trench," as it is configured today, joining strands of Interstates 90, 77, 71 and 490 in the heart of Cleveland.

Downtown Councilman Joe Cimperman said he will press the case against ODOT's trench plan to federal and state elected lead-

ers, including the incoming head of the Ohio Department of Development, Lt. Governor-elect Lee Fisher. He stepped down earlier

this year as head of the Center for Families and Children, a nonprofit group in Midtown.

Cimperman said a recent story by The Plain Dealer on questionable spending and political influence at ODOT has hardened stance against the trench plan.

"I don't trust these guys their engineering," he said.

ODOT is expected to address critics when it appears before Cimperman's Planning Committee 10 a.m. Wednesday at City Hall.

ODOT's economic-impact report, released in draft form March, acknowledges that a permanent closing of ramps uncommon, and it studied suits in Milwaukee, San Francisco and Los Angeles.

The study concluded that existing economic strength — weakness — of a business district before ramp closings had more impact than the closures themselves.

The final test will come in a dozen years, when the whole project is scheduled for completion.

And what if it lives down MidTown's worst expectation? What if it fails or makes a bad situation worse?

"We're working with the city going through all these design options and undergoing federal scrutiny to make sure it works," said ODOT's Hebebrand. And it doesn't work in 2018, the state will fix it.

Cleveland State's Bier is more succinct:

"Whatever happens, we will live with it for 50 years," he said "just like we've lived with the last one for 50 years."