

Ohio Senate Speech 11-15-2023

Paul Barnett

Chair Kunze, Vice Chair Reineke, Ranking Member Antonio, and members of the Transportation Committee, thank you for the opportunity today to present this written testimony to express my support for the passage of Senate Bill 155 as introduced by Senator Mark Romanchuk. My name is Paul Barnett and I am the Service Director for the City of Brunswick in Medina County. I am a registered Professional Engineer in Ohio and Florida. I started my career working as a Bridge Engineer. I have now had 33 years in local government as an engineer. The first 24 years was working for the City of Akron with 18 years as the Public Works Director. I also worked as the Public Works Director for the City of Cleveland before taking the position of Service Director for Brunswick 7 years ago.

In my 39 years working professionally in the transportation field in the State of Ohio, I have never seen such an overt over reach of legislative authority in an attempt to push a personal agenda to force an unwanted issue from one community to an adjoining community. This over reach attempted by the Strongsville Representative in conjunction with the Strongsville Mayor was shrouded as a measure to increase safety and decrease congestion. The Engineering professionals familiar with traffic control knew that the plan to build a ramp on I-71 at Boston Road would not solve the traffic problems at I-71 and SR 82 as was touted as the reason for a proposed ramp at I-71 and Boston Road. Unfortunately, neither the Representative of Strongsville nor the Strongsville Mayor would listen to the professionals and spent \$316,000 of tax payer money to find out the professionals were right. Not only does the study state that there is no change in the level of service at I-71 and SR 82. It does state that there will be additional delays created on I-71 between SR 82 and SR 303 if all but one of the ramp configurations studied were to be built.

Many years ago, the Federal Highway Administration recognized that large Cities were forcing transportation modifications on neighboring Cites, Villages, and Townships against their will. These actions were devastating those

communities. In response to this situation the Federal Highway Administration mandated all transportation project must go through a process with a newly created Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) to assure cooperation and positive outcomes for all communities and the region. In our case this MPO is NOACA. This is an organization whose work is done by transportation planners and engineers who have spent a lifetime working in the transportation industry. This was intended to stop a rough politician from forcing an ill-thought-out modification with potential disastrous effects. Would you go to a local politician to determine a strategy to treat cancer or would you go to an oncologist? This is why the process of having MPO's was created. Senate Bill 155 will correct an error that the Representative for Strongsville nefariously inserted into House Bill 23 at the 11th hour.

You may ask, what is ODOT's opinion on a possible interchange at I-71 and Boston Road? ODOT reviewed and commented on the interchange study that was performed. If you find yourself able to talk off the record with ODOT officials you will learn that they are livid on how this was legislated and with the limited focus of the study that was performed. The State legislature earmarked \$100,000 for an interchange study to be conducted for I-71 from SR 82 in Strongsville to SR 303 in Brunswick. The intent of the study, by ODOT, was to look at all the options in that interstate corridor. Strongsville was the lead agency on the study who hired a Strongsville engineering firm with a scope of work that only allowed the engineering firm to consider multiple ramp configurations at Boston Road. They were not allowed to consider any other option. After the study was presented, there was internal discussions at ODOT to decide if they should claw back the \$100,000 funding since Strongsville did not do what they were charged to do. In a letter from ODOT's Director Marchbanks to the Governor, Strongsville Mayor, Brunswick Mayor, and others dated September 15, 2023 the Director presented a number of issues were identified as follows: "The study did not provide an obvious solution to reduce congestion and decrease crash frequency," "Next steps include completion of the Feasibility Study, which will evaluate all alternatives to improve safety and congestion in and around the City of Strongsville." "These next steps are not currently authorized by the Metropolitan Planning Organization, Northeast Ohio

Areawide Coordinating Agency (NOACA), as required by FHWA.” “In order for a study to mature into a regionally significant project, such as adding an interchange to Interstate 71, local governments will need to concur on solutions and will need to ultimately get approval through NOACA.”

Now for the real reason the Representative for Strongsville and the Strongsville Mayor want an interchange at Boston Road. The largest industrial park in Cuyahoga County is in Strongsville and has an access to SR 82 via Fultz Industrial Parkway but not Boston Road. Even though the Mayor of Strongsville continues to state openly in Council meetings that there are no discussions nor have there been any discussions to extend Fultz Industrial Parkway, their own website is marketing 125 acres of industrial park showing an extension of Fultz Industrial Park to Boston Road. If the goal is really to solve traffic issues at SR 82, they would look at other options. Several years ago, they did have an option. ODOT funded a project to build a ramp from I-71 near SR 82 to Shurmer Road. This was studied and found to improve the traffic conditions at SR 82. Strongsville shut the project down. With a viable option funded, you must ask yourself why Boston Road? The answer is that reducing traffic congestion is not their goal. Boston Road is strictly a two-lane residential road that cannot handle the traffic that the construction of an interstate interchange would create. The entire northern portion of Brunswick would be devastated by a new interchange at Boston Road. Not only would the dramatic increase in traffic make it nearly impossible to pull out of driveways but the reconstruction of Boston Road would make the area unlivable. The increased traffic and new truck traffic would require a severe widening of the roadway and result in the demolition of nearly 90 homes with one option or the relocation of a twin jet fuel pipeline to around 30’ from the front doors of 90 homes. Either one of these options would have a huge negative impact to property values and quality of life. Also, the cost of reconstructing Boston Road could bankrupt the City of Brunswick.

In closing, I urge you to pass Senate Bill 155 which would remove existing language from House Bill 23 that requires ODOT to construct an interchange. The language that currently exists in House Bill 23 is obviously written to trick

legislators into ignoring it while still targeting I-71 between SR 82 and SR 303. By removing this language, we will not have the fear of this interchange being held over the heads of residents both in Brunswick and in Strongsville. Let the process of deciding where interchanges should go be left to the professionals that are equipped to make these decisions and drive communities to work together instead of one imposing their will on one another. While I will not advise you how to treat cancer, I will state that this is a poor location for an interstate interchange. Thank you for your time and attention on this critical issue looming over the City of Brunswick and our 35,426 residents.

I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.