

\$12.7 million interchange expected to bring businesses, jobs to Fairfield

State puts Gilmore Road work on list of 'fast track' projects.

By Kelsey Cano, Staff Writer

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FAIRFIELD — A \$12.7 million interchange project at Interstate 275 and South Gilmore Road is under way, and the hope is it will drive development and economic growth in Butler County.

Two of the county's largest employers — Cincinnati Financial Corporation and Mercy Health Fairfield Hospital — are located near the interchange, and more than 130 acres of land is available for development in the immediate area, according to Fairfield City Manager Art Pizzano.

The interchange has more than 400 businesses within a mile of it and the project could help infuse Fairfield with new business and increased revenue.

The number of businesses, the congestion and capacity failures at certain times of the day at the interchange, put the project on ODOT's list of "fast track" construction projects, which cuts out some bureaucracy so the construction can be started and finished earlier than normally seen.

"To put something together and make it prioritized, to me, that's a big deal, and a lot of that is because of the way the project has been determined to be a potential generator of jobs. That's the big takeaway," Pizzano said.

More than 92,320 vehicles drive along Interstate 275 daily, according to Sharon Smigielski, spokeswoman for the Ohio Department of Transportation's District 8, and about 40,000 vehicles pass through the interchange daily, according to the city of Fairfield.

Traffic flow in the area is important, both for economic reasons and safety reasons, officials said.

Fairfield Chamber of Commerce President and CEO Kert Radel said traffic is "very important" to businesses. The chamber does a business retention survey each year, where both chamber and non-chamber members are asked a series of questions, including how they feel about the flow of traffic.

"Traffic is not only important for a good flow in front of their business, but what is it like two or three miles down to travel through. If they feel it's too congested, that becomes a turnoff," he said.

And for consumers, he said freeing up congestion can make the area more appealing, which can lure them to frequent the area and spend their money at those businesses.

The McDonald's off the interchange completed a pilot renovation last year, when it was the first

Ohio McDonald's to add the side-by-side drive-thru and contemporary dining room, said Pat Pawling, owner and operator of the OmniPlex Drive McDonald's. He's increased staff from 25 to 30 people, and plans to add more during the holidays, he said.

Pawling said the interchange upgrades are "vitally important."

"Simply put, if the interchange traffic flow becomes more efficient, more people will travel through the area. It's our job then to attract these customers to stop and enjoy a meal with us," he said.

The project may also help inject new businesses into the area and there is plenty of available space open for development.

There are more than 750,000 square feet of finished space immediately available for new development in the immediate vicinity of the interchange, including 500,000 square feet in the former Biggs, which is connected to Cincinnati Mall, according to information provided by the city.

Just north of the interchange in Butler County there are three expanses of land open for development including areas of 75 and 36 acres west of South Gilmore Road and south of Mack Road.

Both Cincinnati Financial and Mercy Health Hospital Fairfield continue to grow, with the hospital planning to add new rooms by the spring and Cincinnati Financial last adding a new tower in 2008.

But it's not the expansion alone that benefits local government — Cincinnati Financial Corporation has about 2,900 employees, which amounts to more than \$150 million in annual payroll. Mercy Health Hospital Fairfield has 1,446 employees with more than \$40 million in annual payroll, according to information provided by Fairfield and Mercy Health.

Over 8,000 are employed within a mile of the interchange, according to city of Fairfield officials.

Mercy Health Fairfield Hospital has been expanding for years. It has opened a heart hospital, expanded its birthing center, the emergency department and the rehabilitation center, said Mercy Health spokeswoman Nanette Bentley. Another expansion, which involves building out the fifth floor for an additional 29 private rooms, is ongoing as the hospital moves to all private rooms. Only a "handful" of people will be hired at the project's completion, as it increases the number of rooms, but not the number of patients.

While the project itself will only lead to a few new jobs, Bentley said the hospital is "in a growth mode." About 300 have been hired since 2004, she said.

Pizzano said the roughly \$2 million Fairfield is contributing to the interchange project will be an investment with the possibility of income tax revenue if Mercy Hospital and Cincinnati Financial expand, along with the possibility of the land being developed.

"There are lots of people, and they're decent wage earners," he said.

Cincinnati Mall, also off the I-275 and South Gilmore Road interchange, is going through a 24- to 36-month redevelopment period that began in January, although current tenants are "at a very

low occupancy,” said Cincinnati Mall Head of Redevelopment and General Manager Karla Ellsworth. An anchor tenant, Dean Miuccio Productions, has already moved in, and Ellsworth said the mall has a major announcement coming soon.

Construction will be split into five phases, including northbound bridge widening, southbound widening of South Gilmore Road from north of Kolb Drive to the I-275 westbound ramp and the northbound South Gilmore Road widening from the I-275 interchange to Mack Road.

The project has involved years of planning and collaboration between two cities — Fairfield and Forest Park, two counties — Hamilton and Butler counties, and state and federal agencies. The city of Fairfield has been the driving force behind getting the project running, said Forest Park officials.

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