

Lawmakers debate 'Super 7' highway's future

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HARTFORD — The sponsor of a bill to move forward the construction of a long-considered highway between Norwalk and Danbury sparred with the project's chief opponent as he testified before the state legislature's Transportation Committee Wednesday.

State Sen. Bob Duff, D-25, said the proposed highway, known as "Super 7" to supporters and detractors alike, is crucial for Connecticut's economic vitality. Transportation Committee member and Wilton state Rep. Toni Boucher, R-143, replied that there is no federal or state money allocated for the project, which she

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said would harm the environment and public health in her town.

Duff's bill would require the state Department of Transportation to establish a timeline for the construction of Super 7. The project has been on the books for more than half a decade, but opposition in the suburbs between Norwalk and Danbury has kept shovels out of the ground.

In recent years, Wilton's elected officials have taken the lead in criticizing the highway, which would run through the town. Wilton First Selectman William Brennan was the first to speak at the hearing, calling Super 7 "a classic example of short sightedness and poor planning."

The proposed highway's right-of-way also cuts through Ridgefield and Redding, and first selectmen from those towns voiced their opposition at the hearing.

Duff said Super 7's critics stand "in the way of common sense and regional economic development." The Route 7 cur-

rently linking Norwalk to Danbury runs as a mostly two-lane thoroughfare — often jammed with cars at rush hour.

"We need a Route-7 expressway to continue our economic vitality here in the state," he said. "We talk a lot about job growth and job creation (being a priority). Without the Super-7 expressway, that is just not the case."

Boucher asked Duff how Connecticut would acquire the land to build Super 7, saying the state owns less than half the right of way. Duff said he has seen written reports that the state owns 90 percent of the land.

After Duff mentioned a rally in support of Super 7 earlier this month that drew more than 150 people, Boucher cited meetings in 1999 — the last time the project was seriously considered — to which hundreds of the highway's opponents turned out.

Transportation Committee members and Super 7 supporters state Sen. Andrew McDonald, D-27, and state Rep. Chris Perone, D-137, spoke in favor of the project at the hearing.

Disagreement over Super 7 also extended to public health as Boucher cited a University of Pennsylvania study on respiratory illness.

"Children tested who lived within a third of a mile from a highway had reduced their lung capacity by 50 percent from the age of 10 to 18," she said.

An attorney from the Connecticut Fund for the Environment echoed her concerns.

Duff and other Super 7 proponents have long said cars idling on the existing route produce more emissions than would those cruising on a highway.

"I tell you what: I'll take a look at that study if you agree to do a study on Wilton that looks at the condition and the air quality on Route 7 in the morning and all the roads that people cut through to avoid Route 7," Duff said.

Super 7 opponents also took time Wednesday to lobby the committee for funds to improve the Danbury-branch rail line — a project they said would help reduce traffic between Danbury and Norwalk. Duff said he supports rail service upgrades in

addition to the highway.

Another alternative cited by Brennan is the \$36 million project already underway to widen sections of the existing Route 7. Duff has called it a waste of money, but Brennan disagreed.

"After eight years the widening of Route 7 is progressing nicely with two sections under construction," Brennan said, predicting traffic improvements after the project's completion.

Norwalk director of marketing and business Tad Diesel represented Mayor Richard Moccia and the Greater Norwalk Chamber of Commerce at the hearing.

"In concert with an improved rail transit system and completion of the Route 7-(Merritt Parkway) interchange ... (Super 7) is an essential step towards improvements in the transportation system," Diesel said.

The Transportation Committee must decide by March 19 whether to move the bill to the full legislature.

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