

# State may need to buy 1,000 acres for Super 7

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**REGION**—Less than half the land needed for a proposed highway between Norwalk and Danbury is owned by the state, the Connecticut Department of Transportation said last week.

The figure contradicts supporters of the so-called "Super 7" highway, who have said the state owns 90 percent of the land. Super 7 is supported by most Norwalk officials, but bitterly opposed by the city's northern suburbs through which the highway would be

carved.

While the state owns the lion's share of the land needed for Super 7 in Wilton, it would likely need to acquire more than 1,000 acres to complete the project under current plans. This could increase the highway's cost significantly, opponents predict.

Most of the unowned land lies in Ridgefield and Redding, towns in which officials oppose the highway project.

The project's supporters have said Super 7 would ease frequent congestion on the

existing Route 7, which runs through Wilton, Ridgefield and Redding as a mostly two-lane thoroughfare.

While the exact percentage of land owned for the project is unknown, DOT spokesman Kevin Nursick said it lies somewhere between 40 and 50 percent. Currently the state owns 890 acres of land in the highway's proposed right of way, known to the department as the Super 7 "alignment."

"From Wilton down to Norwalk we own pretty much that whole alignment," Nursick

said. "From the Ridgefield-Wilton line north over to Danbury, (we do not own) the majority."

The highway has been planned for more than 50 years, but vocal opposition has kept it in the planning stages. In recent years, the DOT has begun to widen the existing Route 7 to ease congestion. Super 7 proponents call that a waste of money.

Super 7 critic and state Rep. Toni Boucher, R-143, said the unowned land is yet another reason the project will never

move forward.

"We're really talking about a lot of money that the state doesn't have and the federal government doesn't have. You have to factor in the cost of legislation, which could go on for years."

State Sen. Bob Duff has raked the coals of support and dissent this year by introducing a bill that would require the DOT to produce a timeline for the highway's completion.

Duff and other supporters have previously cited the 90

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percent figure, and the senator said he will take up the issue with transportation officials in the coming weeks.

Last week Duff testified at a hearing of the state legislature's Transportation Committee on the need for Super 7. At the hearing he and Boucher, a committee member, disagreed over the percentage.

"The conventional wisdom had been 90 percent," Duff said in a later interview. "There have been mixed messages coming out of DOT. The 40-percent number is something that

popped up at the hearing and never before. It's hard to comment yet, because I want to discuss where they own the land."

Ridgefield First Selectman Rudy Marconi said most of the land needed for Super 7 in Ridgefield is owned by private property owners, raising the prospect of eminent domain seizures. Marconi said he believes there are several homes in the alignment.

Nursick said of the 890 acres owned by the state, nearly 830 are undeveloped. Slightly more than 60 acres are developed for housing, and the state owns 20

houses on 19 lots; some are rented out to tenants.

The land was acquired in the 1960's and 1970's for nearly \$30 million — through voluntary sale and eminent domain seizures. The state estimates its current value at more than \$160 million.

State law forbids the DOT to sell the land for a purpose other than the highway.

Boucher has tried to change that, introducing legislation several years ago to establish a "greenway" — a strip of open space and parkland. Boucher has also proposed using the

land for affordable housing or municipal needs in Wilton.

Wilton First Selectman William Brennan said he would like to see the DOT sell the land.

"I think the best way to avoid having another episode like this in 10 years is to come up with a permanent solution for the DOT to get rid of (it)," Brennan said.

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