

**Analysis of Public Comment on a Prairie Parkway Alignment
December 11, 2001 – February 10, 2002**

The Context for the Prairie Parkway

The Prairie Parkway is a proposed highway in western Kane and Kendall Counties, the first leg of which is proposed to run from I-88 on the north to I-80 on the south. A different version of an “Outer Belt” (from I-90 to I-88) was recommended as a “Corridor for Further Study” in the Chicago Area Transportation Study’s *2020 Regional Transportation Plan*, published in 1997 and updated in 2000.¹ When the 2030 Regional Transportation Plan was released in 2003, the project was described as connecting I-88 and I-80. The Kane and Kendall County comprehensive plans designate most of the area now identified for the right-of-way as an agricultural protection zone. In late 2001 the Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT) held a hearing on a plan to preserve a potential corridor. Shortly thereafter, Congressman Dennis Hastert made \$15 million of federal funds available to study the Prairie Parkway.

The IDOT District 3 office held a hearing on the proposed corridor on December 11, 2001; 851 people attended. Also in attendance for the three and a half hour hearing were nine IDOT staff and seven IDOT consultants. The hearing was followed by a thirty day comment period, which was extended to sixty days, at the request of local governmental bodies.² The project is now moving through the stages of Phase I engineering. The Prairie Parkway was already under study when the Illinois General Assembly enacted a Context Sensitive Design law in the spring of 2003; IDOT has stated it intends to apply its new Context Sensitive Solutions policy to the Prairie Parkway.³

Goals and Parameters of Analysis

The Center for Neighborhood Technology (CNT) conducted an analysis of public comment on the Prairie Parkway in mid-2004, with two primary goals in mind. The first was to efficiently summarize the largest body of documentation available on public attitude toward the Prairie Parkway; the second was to develop a replicable methodology for analyzing abundant comment in the hope that this methodology, or one similar to it, would be adopted by implementers responsible for conducting public involvement processes.

IDOT opened the public comment period with a request for comment on a specific alignment rather than comment on the need for the road itself or alternatives to it. Therefore, it is virtually impossible in many cases to code the comment received into neat categories. Most, perhaps the majority, of respondents did not separate the alignment question from their overall support for or opposition to a new or expanded north-south roadway in Kane and Kendall Counties.

¹ Corridors for Further Study are generally understood to be projects in the second tier of planning, for study after higher priority regional projects are underway.

² *The Prairie Parkway: Public Hearing Summary*, Illinois Department of Transportation, 2001

³ <http://www.dot.state.il.us/css/d3/d3.html>

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CNT conducted a review of documentation from the comment period of December 2001-February 2002 at the District Three office of the Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT) in Ottawa, IL. Categories of information that were captured included: last name/first initial, hometown, opinion (favor-oppose-neutral), and whether the letter/email/resolution was sent by an individual, a municipality, a business or a civic/social/environmental group. Correspondence that was clearly part of an organized campaign was coded. As themes became apparent (e.g., concern for county plans, preference for use of IL 47 as an alternative) in the review of documents, they were also coded.

General Conclusions from the Data

IDOT reported that approximately 1500 comments were received.⁴ CNT found 1157 that were unduplicated.⁵ The difference is understandable. It is clear that some people submitted their comments more than once. There were also some instances of a letter being photocopied more than once (because IDOT carefully numbered each letter received, it was possible to distinguish which were duplicate photocopies and which were duplicate submissions, but the duplications by type were not evaluated for purposes of this analysis). It is also possible that CNT included some other duplicates in this study; where there was ambiguity, CNT erred on the side of including a potential duplicate. Slightly more than 100 of the comments represented two or more individuals in a family, increasing somewhat the number of people represented by the comments.

In 1141 cases, the correspondence could be coded as “favor,” “oppose” or “neutral/mixed.” Those who supported a road like the Prairie Parkway, but were opposed to a particular alignment were coded as “neutral/mixed” as were people who asked a question rather than offering an opinion. Some letters were illegible and could not be coded. There were an additional 520 signatures on a petition opposing the Prairie Parkway that were not entered into the data individually for reasons of time. Some petition signatures may have come from people who also submitted letters.

The analysis showed that 560 respondents (48%) favored the Prairie Parkway or favored the particular alignment. It was difficult if not impossible in many cases to separate opinion on the project from opinion on the alignment, although IDOT was seeking comment on the latter.

There were 518 comments (45%) in opposition to the Prairie Parkway or the alignment (and 520 petition signatures which are not included in the analysis). An additional 63 people (5%) offered comment that was neutral or mixed and just over a dozen (1%) did not fall into any of those categories (the most common reason for inability to code into a category was that the testimonial was unreadable).

⁴ *The Prairie Parkway: Public Hearing Summary*, Illinois Department of Transportation, 2001

⁵ The last Appendix has the full spreadsheet in the order tabulated; the data can be cross-checked with the hard copies, which are in three volumes at the District 3 IDOT office.

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Organized Comment

Implementers sometimes express discomfort with analyzing public comment. The lack of an objective standard for “weighting” the “value” of comments arriving by different means or from different sources (campaign, petition or original text; municipal, business, individual or non-governmental organization) is most often cited as the reason for reluctance to analyze the data. In this study, relative value is not quantified, but the various strategies eliciting responses are described so the reader may assess comparative significance.

The 520 petition signatures are one example of a choreographed response. Another type is campaigns where the wording or format of the response is similar enough to be quickly discerned.

There were four discernable campaigns within the documents studied that were initiated by groups “favoring” the Parkway or the alignment. The campaigns were characterized by format (for example, a preprinted postcard) or consistent wording. The responses of 411 of the 560 (73%) respondents in favor clearly emanated from these four campaigns. A couple of dozen others used one or more paragraphs from a campaign in favor of the proposed Parkway, but customized their letters enough that they were not coded as “campaign.”

There was evidence that campaigns on the “oppose” side had encouraged response, but few respondents used boilerplate text. Twenty-six of the 518 (5%) opposing the proposed road used uniform wording opposing the “belt line.” Six others affixed their signature to an organization’s opposition letter and sent it in as their individual response, often with a phrase of endorsement. Four recipients of the postcards (a campaign in support of the proposed Parkway) signed the card bearing their preprinted name and returned it indicating that they were in opposition to the project. The majority of the letters in opposition were quite individualized, although themes recurred.

Geographic Differences

Location mattered greatly in the responses elicited (see Appendix I for graphic representations of the following tabulations). There was strong opposition in the communities within five miles on either side of the corridor; 85% of respondents within the corridor opposed the Parkway in general or the alignment in particular. In nearby corridors the reaction was mixed. Residents of a ten mile wide corridor to the west (the “DeKalb Corridor”) favored the project by a margin of 61% to 39%. Residents of the Fox Valley Corridor (also approximately ten miles wide) opposed the project by a margin of 60% to 40%. The numbers by community are found in Appendix II.⁶

On the other hand, reaction from outside the three corridors nearest the proposed alignment was highly favorable; 91% of outside respondents favored the Prairie Parkway and/or its alignment. McHenry County was strongly represented in the favorable comment (498 responses in favor could be identified by location; 235 of those, or 47% were from McHenry

⁶ A few communities straddle boundaries between the corridors. The town was assigned to the corridor that appeared to have the bulk of the municipal land area.

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County residents or businesses). Three of the campaigns made reference to McHenry County. Other counties that were represented in the favorable comment included Cook, DeKalb, DuPage, Grundy, Kane, Kendall, Lake, LaSalle, Will and some miscellaneous downstate representation; no significant pattern was discernable from those counties. Some support came from Indiana (3), Wisconsin (8) and Minnesota (1).

Commenter Types

Responses were categorized by official affiliation when one was given; the majority of the comments (about 90%) were from individuals. Forty comments represented municipal or county opinion; of those, 23 favored the Parkway (including 14 from within five miles of the alignment), 12 opposed it (3 within five miles of the alignment) and 5 offered neutral or mixed comments (4 within five miles of the alignment).

Of the 68 responses from businesses, 61 supported the Parkway, three opposed, two were neutral/mixed and two could not be categorized. Forty-eight of the business comments (71%) had McHenry County addresses. Letters from farm families were not included in the business column, but perhaps should have been. These documents ranged from heartfelt, handwritten expressions of familial loss to highly businesslike letters from family trusts. The former category was the more dominant and so letters from agricultural families were uniformly coded as individual. See Appendix III for a digest of municipal, business and other organizational positions.

There were just a handful of letters (8) on the stationary of civic, social or environmental organizations (although references were made, in a few other letters from individuals, to membership in groups such as the Sierra Club and Citizens Against the Sprawlway). All were coded as opposed to the proposed Parkway.

Comment was received in the form of letters, resolutions, postcards, emails and comment sheets. For the purposes of this review, the format of the comment did not seem to be particularly significant and no attempt was made to quantify by that variable.

Secondary Themes

Some themes were repeated often enough to discern early in the review. Although IDOT requested comment only on one specific alignment, several other north-south routes were touted as preferable alternatives, including I-39, IL 23 and IL 47. IL 47 was mentioned 132 times, primarily by people who opposed the Parkway (three of the 132 were local people who supported the Parkway but thought IL 47 should be widened in addition). The 132 who suggested IL 47 as an alternative constitute 11% of total respondents. Transit was rarely mentioned as an alternative.

Eighty people (7%), all of whom were opposed or had neutral/mixed responses to the proposed Parkway, cited local county plans as a source for their misgivings or questions. Agricultural preservation was another significant theme, but one that became apparent only after too many records had been tabulated to begin the project anew. Another untabulated

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theme included testimonials from people who did not necessarily oppose the proposed Parkway, but opposed a diagonal cut across their fields or those of their neighbors. IDOT has made some modifications of the proposed corridor to follow property lines or other existing boundaries in response to several of those concerns.

Conclusion

CNT set out to complete this analysis with two goals in mind: to efficiently summarize the largest available body of documentation on public attitude toward the Prairie Parkway and to develop a replicable methodology for analyzing abundant comment in the hope that this methodology, or one similar to it, would be adopted by implementers who conduct public involvement processes. The data was coded, analyzed and written up in a relatively modest amount of time (just under one person-week). It provided meaningful data about consensus or lack of consensus about the project, information that would have been valuable for decision-makers early in the process. Supplementary analysis provided more robust information on common themes and differences in attitude by geographic location. The methodology for conducting this type of analysis has been documented, is being disseminated and is attached as the last appendix to this report.