

Editorial: The ICC conundrum

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By Daily Record Staff

The long-debated, long-awaited, long-constructed Intercounty Connector opened in its 18.8-mile entirety just in time for the annual Thanksgiving traffic scrum.

On the drawing boards for decades, the six-lane toll road links Interstate 270 in Montgomery County with Interstate 95 in Prince George's County.

In terms of traffic, proponents of the ICC say it will help relieve congestion on the Capital Beltway, although officials say that local roads leading to the new highway may become jammed as drivers try to take advantage of the ICC.

In terms of economic development, the ICC could be a missing catalytic link as it connects Maryland's technology-rich I-270 corridor and the burgeoning I-95 corridor near Konterra, a long-planned development that, along with National Harbor (see accompanying editorial), could give Prince George's County two mega-centers.

That's the good-news potential of the ICC. But there is also a sobering side.

At \$2.56 billion, the ICC is the most expensive road ever built in Maryland. Although it will be financed largely by tolls — and hefty ones at that — building this road and the \$1 billion worth of express toll lanes on I-95 north of Baltimore means that the Maryland Transportation Authority is on course to nearly reach the limit of its borrowing capacity in fiscal 2017.

Also, a sizeable amount of anticipated federal highway funding has already been allocated to help pay for the ICC.

The decision to build the ICC as a toll road reflects a change in philosophy for Maryland, which has long kept its tolls relatively low because they were used mainly to operate existing bridges, tunnels and highways.

"The state has mortgaged its transportation future to the ICC in many ways," Montgomery County Council member Phil Andrews, a critic of the highway, told The Washington Post. "The opportunity cost of the ICC has been huge because it has foreclosed improving many other roads."

State Comptroller Peter Franchot, who formerly represented Montgomery County in the House of Delegates, disagrees. "The road, from an economic standpoint, will pay for itself many times over," he said.

The implications of the impact of the ICC and the new I-95 toll lanes on Maryland's ability to pay for other urgent transportation needs, such as the Red and Purple lines, need to be considered carefully as part of any financing plan the O'Malley administration submits to the 2012 General Assembly. Otherwise, we'll be kicking the fiscal can down the potholed road once again.