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Bredesen double-cross promotes urban sprawl

By **FRANK CAGLE**
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Opponents of the Knoxville beltway route through Hardin Valley are still reeling from the announcement this week that Gov. Phil Bredesen's administration will proceed with the project. They feel, with justification, that they have been double-crossed.

Candidate Bredesen certainly gave every indication to Knox County voters and Hardin Valley residents in particular that as governor he would give them relief. That hope generated a lot of votes for Bredesen and helped him carry traditionally Republican Knox County. It was a margin that put him in office. But the relief for beltway opponents has consisted of a review and a study and a few months of delay. The project will now proceed.

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It would appear the Knoxville business community's fund-raisers for Bredesen, like the one last week, had more influence than voters.

Hardin Valley residents have had a packet of information in opposition to the project, a packet that includes a column I wrote four or five years ago suggesting that, if Knoxville should get a beltway, it should be to relieve traffic. As such, it should be a route from Lake City to Oliver Springs and be far enough from Knoxville to actually do some good.

The route through Hardin Valley is not about relieving traffic congestion. It will only create more. Look at the last 20 years in West Knox County. Farm land accessible to interstate interchanges at West Hills, Cedar Bluff, Lovell Road and Campbell Station has been transformed into subdivisions, with the inevitable shopping centers. Has this development decreased traffic on Interstate 40 west of Knoxville? Those of you who foam at the mouth about urban sprawl should get ready: You ain't seen nothin' yet.

It has been a lot of years since anyone has seen the original beltway proposal. It does not consist of a single leg from I-75 west to I-40. The entire project is a loop, and the other leg goes from I-75 north of Knoxville and extends east to Sevier County and its tourist destinations. If the object is to get traffic around Knoxville in a cost-effective manner, then that leg would have been built first.

Why? Because land in East Knox County is cheaper. It is sparsely populated in many places, thus fewer neighborhoods disrupted. Getting tourists to Sevier County and truckers to I-81 would cut down on traffic flow into Knoxville.

(Full disclosure. I live east of Knoxville; this route passes near my farm. But I despise the whole idea of this beltway and hope to God it is never built. But that's beside the point.)

Building the leg through Hardin Valley will open up more areas to be exploited with those West Knox County expensive houses and shopping areas. It's much more lucrative than building subdivisions in Skagston, Mascot and Corryton.

The much-maligned I-840 that leaves I-40 at Lebanon and circles around across Interstate 65 south of Nashville is for traffic. There isn't any development at any of the exits. It is just a quick way to avoid Nashville traffic. I-840 is 35 miles from the Nashville city limits. That's a beltway. That is for traffic. That is what the Blue Route through Anderson County would be.

It is argued that the Orange Route through Hardin Valley is shorter and thus cheaper to build. Sure. And, when it is completed, it will be time to start building the Blue Route as well. That way, road builders get to build the Orange Route and the Blue Route. Who thinks that's cheaper than just building the Blue Route?

The Bredesen administration has evidently decided that the voters in Hardin Valley are expendable. But I think they have miscalculated. Opposition to the beltway and the consequent contribution to sprawl will resonate with voters all over Knox County and the region. The fallout from this decision will have implications for years to come.

In population terms, Knox County has already shifted its center from Gay Street to Cedar Bluff Road. The new corridor through Hardin Valley will shift it even farther west.

The issue is much larger than its impact on residents of Hardin Valley.

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