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Cinci-Dayton?

Will expansion bring growth - or gridlock?

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This 17-mile stretch of highway is where Cincinnati and Dayton will finally come together.

Farmlands along Interstate 75 are being replaced by an explosion of shopping plazas, hospitals, homes, schools, offices and distribution centers.

Planners have long predicted that someday the outskirts of Cincinnati and Dayton would merge, much like Dallas-Fort Worth. That "someday" appears close.

Experts predict the resulting megalopolis of about 3 million people would count as the nation's 15th-largest market.

Priming the pump will be hundreds of millions of dollars to be invested in four major exits:

- The Liberty interchange will open hundreds of acres for commercial development.
- A bigger Monroe exit will pave the way for an \$80 million outlet mall and an industrial park that could employ 7,000.
- In struggling Middletown, a rebuilt exit could spark renewal.
- Closer to Dayton, leaders say a new exit will transform the "Austin Centre" area into a high-tech commercial zone.

So, are we ready to think Cincinnati-Dayton?

"What we are doing is really thinking about what the whole I-75 corridor between the two beltways looks like and its impact on job growth in Southwest Ohio," says John Fonner, executive director of the Butler County Transportation Improvement District. "Long range, that corridor - that handful of exits - will be the center of the universe."

While politicians and business leaders envision growth in mostly positive terms, environmentalists see more sprawl and gridlock.

"All that ever happens is the road will become congested again and they will have to widen it," says Enid Nagel, chairperson for the Sierra Club's Ohio chapter. "It's a never-ending cycle, and it's bad for the environment."

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