

Tollway's forest preserve plan under fire

Chicago Tribune, June 29, 2006, by Virginia Groark

A proposal to use Cook County forest preserve land for drainage as part of the widening of the Tri-State Tollway is generating criticism from environmentalists who say it sets a bad precedent.

The Illinois State Toll Highway Authority is seeking easements on 13 parcels of Cook County Forest Preserve District land--a total of 16 acres along the Tri-State between Touhy Avenue and Lake-Cook Road in the northwest part of the county--for drainage and to install embankments, agency spokeswoman Joelle McGinnis said.

The tollway would pay the forest preserve \$4.1 million for the easement and the removal of scrub trees on the property, she said. Under the proposal, the forest preserve would continue to own the land.

Though some are next to one another, not all 13 parcels, none wider than 75 feet, are connected. The property will not be paved, and the fence that separates tollway property from the forest preserve land will remain, she said.

"All of the roadway will be within the tollway current right of way," she said.

But Benjamin Cox, executive director of Friends of the Forest Preserves, doesn't want to see the government taking protected land for a highway project.

"The days of big agencies strolling in and taking land from the forest preserve are over," said Cox, whose group is urging county officials to oppose the plan.

The tollway authority intends to widen the 8.7-mile stretch of the Tri-State to eight lanes from six as part of its ongoing \$5.3 billion construction program to rebuild its 274-mile system and reduce congestion.

If the proposal is approved, the agency would not install a typical 3-foot ditch for drainage, McGinnis said.

Instead, it would use native plantings at the base of the embankments

to help filter and drain water.

Cox, however, is skeptical that the native plants would survive.