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"In Our Opinion" (OpEd)

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Right route for U.S. 31

New Study supports plan for bypass along 120th Avenue

Where Ottawa County's proposed U.W. 31 Bypass is concerned, they'll come whether or not you build it. That conclusion from a Michigan State University study adds new weight to the argument for a freeway roughly through the middle of the county. The recently released report should help sway those who have opposed the best bypass plan. In addition, it should help convince worried residents that the mid-county route won't cause the unchecked sprawl that they fear.

The Michigan Department of Transportation commissioned the study from MSU's Basic Science and Remote Sensing Initiative, which specialized in monitoring land use. Using economic and population forecasts, traffic statistics and satellite images, the MSU group looked at how competing bypass proposals would affect the county over the next 20 years. The overall growth in the county would be the same no matter which alternative is selected, the study concludes. The results argue for the most sensible alternative -- a freeway that would run through Olive, Robinson, Crockery and Zeeland townships along 120th Avenue. The road would provide a north-south path between Int. 196 and Int. 96 and relieve congestion on U.S. 31 along the county's western edge. Also, the bypass would add a much needed second crossing over the Grand River to relieve jams on the U.S. 31 bridge.

The planned freeway has raised understandable concerns in the mostly rural townships it would traverse. Some township boards have officially opposed it. Residents of those areas don't want to see farm fields overrun by fast food restaurants, gas stations, and homes on expansive lots. The MSU report helps answer these worries. True, the study projects more acres swallowed by development in these townships with the proposed road than without it, but the difference isn't great.

Opponents have backed an alternative to the mid-county route. They want smaller bypasses around Holland and Zeeland and an additional bridge in Grand Haven. The MSU study shows no big difference in the growth created by their favored alternatives and the one they oppose. More than roads, other

factors -- especially economics -- will drive where people and businesses move, the study suggests.

Local leaders should draw another conclusion from these numbers. More than ever, Ottawa County needs strong county and multi-county planning. Controlling the homes and businesses that will come into the county over the next two decades can't be a township-by-township proposition. A business turned down by one government will look to the next for approval. Only broader cooperation through the Macatawa Area Coordinating Council (MACC) and other groups with wider scope will successfully address these issues.

This MSU analysis will become part of a larger environmental impact statement that will go to the Federal Highway Administration. The first part of that statement, released for years ago, questioned the toll the 120th Avenue route would take on wildlife, people and agriculture. This latest report balances these conclusions with more positive ones, shared by many in Ottawa County.

The 120th Avenue route has been embraced by the Michigan Department of Transportation, the Ottawa County Board of Commissioners and MACC, the regional planning group. The Federal Highway Administration, which will make a final decision on the route in the next two years, should embrace the 120th Avenue plan, too. So should local leaders who continue to put up roadblocks to the best bypass option.