

# THE ADVOCATE

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## Conflict brews over connector road

### Plan west of Covington draws intense opposition

**BY SARA PAGONES**

Staff writer

St. Tammany Parish President Pat Brister describes a proposed 2-mile connector road from Ochsner Boulevard to La. 1077 west of Covington as a relief valve of sorts, an alternative roadway that will reduce chronic traffic congestion on heavily traveled Interstate 12.

But the proposed Ochsner Boulevard Extension, which is on the parish's major thoroughfare plan that was unveiled in 2017, is drawing intense opposition from residents of nearby subdivisions and owners of several large property tracts, who say it will create new traffic problems and might be unneeded given the state's plans to widen I-12.

Opponents claim that the road would mainly benefit a single landowner, Bruce Wainer, who is negotiating to sell a large tract of land to Medline, a manufacturer and distributor of medical supplies that wants to expand its distribution operations in St. Tammany. The company is now located on the other side of I-12, less than a mile away.

Critics turned out in large numbers at a Planning and Zoning Commission meeting last week to oppose a rezoning that's needed if Medline is to build an 800,000-square-foot distribution center on the Ochsner Boulevard Extension.

The commission agreed to hold a separate meeting on the issue Sept. 26.

Wainer referred questions to his attorney, Paul Mayronne, who said the road project was conceived under former Parish President Kevin Davis' administration as part of an effort to improve east-west connections

on the western side of the parish. It is unrelated to the Medline project, he said. Nonetheless, he said the connector road is an important part of Medline's consideration of the Wainer site. The company is looking to use 65 to 70 acres of land, he said. Its planned distribution center would take at least a year to build and would likely not begin until the first quarter of 2020, he said.

The expansion would eventually create close to 300 jobs, up from about 50 jobs at the current Medline location at La. 1077 and I-12, according to Chris Masingill, CEO of the St. Tammany Parish Development District.

But it would also bring as many as 174 18-wheelers to the expanded site every day, Mayronne told the parish Planning and Zoning Commission recently. That's riling residents who don't want the additional traffic.

The proposed Medline expansion represents a classic conflict for the growing suburban parish: economic development vs. quality of life.

Masingill said the Illinoisbased Medline is a good corporate citizen with a proven track record. "This is the kind of company we want," he said.

But Nancy Wagner, president of the Flower Estates Civic Association, said the distribution center needs to go in an appropriately zoned industrial location. "We're not against economic development," she said, but residential and industrial uses are not a good mix.

But while the Medline proposal has drawn opposition, so has the proposed Ochsner Boulevard Extension. Some residents worry it will worsen traffic congestion in the area by drawing additional vehicles onto the two-lane La. 1077 and La. 21.

Three large property owners in the La. 1077 corridor sent a letter to the state Department of Transportation and Development last month expressing concerns about the proposed road, which needs approval from the state to tie in to La. 1077.

The letter was signed by Mike Saucier, representing Copperstill Marketplace; Blaire Fernandez, representing property owner Ethel Goodbee; and Levere Montgomery, who owns land in the area and is the brother of 22nd Judicial District Attorney Warren Montgomery.

The proposed connector road, which parish officials said would cost \$9 million, would run through hundreds of acres of private property that would be developed along the roadway, the letter said. The property owners contend that no one on the west side of La. 1077 was consulted about the road extension or its impact on future development.

Wagner said La. 1077 is already jammed with traffic and would only get worse if the connector road is finished. Shady Lakes subdivision would be the most affected by noise because it would be closest to the connector road, which would not have much of a buffer, she said.

Westbound traffic, including the 18-wheelers, would travel on the connector to La. 1077 and turn right, then use the roundabout near Archbishop Hannan High School to access I-12, Wagner said. Eastbound traffic would come down Ochsner Boulevard to La. 21 and would have to move over three lanes to make a left-hand turn onto the I-12 on-ramp.

In the letter to the Department of Transportation and Development, the property owners also question building an east-west connection before a planned widening of I-12 is complete and before there are improvements to La. 1077, which now serves as a major north-south roadway in western St. Tammany.

The road project is being funded by a recent bond issue approved by the Parish Council, Brister said. The parish has budgeted another \$1 million for mitigation and property acquisition, which is underway, she said.

Construction, set to begin in the first half of next year, will take 15 months.

During a recent candidate forum sponsored by the Madisonville Chamber of Commerce, Brister said she's not certain that the planned site is the best place for Medline to expand.

But she said the road will provide an alternate east-west route to allow motorists to avoid using I-12 between major corridors. The lack of eastwest routes now forces motorists to use I-12 for local trips.

As for traffic worries concerning Medline's plans, she said a traffic study will be required for any future development, including Medline.

The road does have some support. Masingill said it's important for the Medline expansion but also is a key piece of infrastructure in itself. Parish officials are working to have good arteries in place, he said, and this addition will help.

"Without businesses growing, we can't have the kind of quality of life we value in St. Tammany," he said.

To Goodbee

Tchefuncte River

**Proposed Ochsner Boulevard extension**

**COVINGTON**

1085

1077

1085

Existing  
Ochsner  
Boulevard

Tyler St.

21

12

Turnpike Rd.

Brewster Rd.

Pinacle Pkwy.

Staff map

