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Route 53 Tollway Still a Possible Threat to Preserve

The 80-acre Almond Marsh Nature Preserve lies directly in the path of the proposed 25-mile Route 53 Tollway in Lake County, Illinois. The preserve's wetland and sedge-meadow complex is home to the state-endangered yellow-headed blackbird, the black-crowned night-heron and the threatened pied-billed grebe. "There is also a heron rookery, which is a breeding ground for the sandhill crane, that would be destroyed," says Betsy Dietel, executive director of the [Liberty Prairie Conservancy](#).

The road proposal, long opposed by conservationists, may have finally bitten the dust. The [Illinois State Toll Highway Authority](#) has admitted that it does not have the money to build the Route 53 Tollway. At \$1.8 billion, the tollway proposal would further worsen the financial plight of the Toll Authority, which is already struggling to muster the funds necessary to maintain its existing system.

"I'm one of the thousands of people who have been opposed to the road all along," said [Lake County Board](#) Member Martha Marks. "The promised funding for the tollway was never nearly enough, and now the state is finally saying that there's not enough money. We're hoping money will be put into our local roads instead, where the focus should have been all along," she said.

According to the [Environmental Law & Policy Center](#) (ELPC), the draft Environmental Impact Statement indicates that local improvements would provide the best solution to help alleviate traffic congestion in Lake County more quickly, with less damage to the environment, less pressure for sprawl, and less drain on state coffers than the Route 53 Tollway. The ELPC Web site includes [a map of the proposed route](#) and reports on "[Crossroads: Smart Transportation Options for Lake County](#)." You can also download the "[Citizens' Plan for Transportation Improvements in Lake County, Illinois](#)," prepared by Lane Kendig of Lane Kendig, Inc.

However, conservationists are concerned that construction may still be approved. "The situation is urgent," said Susan Zingle, executive director of the Lake County Conservation Alliance. "The governor will make a decision on whether to continue the proposed study during the current legislative session. The time to act is now," she added. Visit the [Illinois Action Project](#) to send Governor Ryan a message, or contact him at (312) 814-2121.

— Amy Reavis Sinn

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