

Road to nowhere

Poor traffic planning helped doom Consumer Square; no fixes in sight

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TOM DODGE

A goose appears to be the only customer near what remains of the Consumer Square shopping area near I-70 at Brice Road. There are no immediate plans to redevelop the area.

COTA buses still run to Consumer Square, although it is now 40 barren acres of asphalt, gravel and streetlights.

RB-3 Associates, which had owned the shopping strip near the I-70 interchange at Brice Road since the 1980s, bulldozed the empty stores this past fall.

Consumer Square opened in 1985 as the new shopping Mecca on the Far East Side. Major stores such as Meijer, Target, Best Buy, Burlington Coat Factory and Babies "R" Us bloomed around the

interchange.

But some think the seeds for failure were sown from the start because of poor traffic planning that didn't deal with congestion that, ultimately, discouraged would-be customers.

Yet, today, government officials have no immediate plans to confront the traffic congestion or develop a long-term road map to redevelop the area, including the 40 acres that were Consumer Square.

Columbus businessman Robert Weiler, who helped develop 330 acres south of the interchange beginning in the 1970s, said Brice Road's decline is directly related to the design of the interchange and the Brice Road-Tussing Road intersection.

The interchange was designed 40 years ago, Weiler said. "Those design standards today are terribly inadequate. You've got horrendous traffic logistics to get into the (shopping center)."

Drivers exiting from eastbound I-70 had to cross over several lanes of traffic to turn left at Tussing and reach the shopping area. And the Brice-Tussing intersection is so close to the exit ramp that they had only about a quarter-mile to do that.

"It's an area that's challenging to get in and out of," agreed Kevin Wheeler, Columbus assistant planning administrator.

But the problem is more about the increase in traffic than the road design, said Nick Gill, assistant transportation director for the Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission.

A state study from 2007 acknowledged that the interchange is inadequate to handle the traffic.

Ten years ago, more than 61,000 vehicles passed by Consumer Square on Brice Road every day. By 2006, more than 100,000 vehicles were traveling on I-70 at Brice each day, according to MORPC.

But though developers generally favor high traffic counts, the Brice-Tussing area is too congested to attract them, Weiler said.

Something should be done to make it easier for drivers, said Reynoldsburg resident Josh Ohlinger, 25. He was visiting the JCPenney Furniture Outlet next to the Consumer Square site.

"It's a pain," he said. "It's pretty bad to get back in here."

"The traffic pattern is a horrible problem," said Wes Potts, whose Express Care/Valvoline Oil is the only business open among a strip of stores on the southwest side of the I-70/Brice interchange.

"Until Reynoldsburg and Columbus come together and figure out a way to filter traffic, nothing will happen."

The Ohio Department of Transportation completed a final draft plan to fix the I-70/Brice interchange in 2007 but ran out of money to finish the plan, spokeswoman Nancy Burton said. She didn't know how much was needed but said the state's budget woes and other projects pushed it aside.

The draft suggests two options estimated to cost up to \$57 million: realigning the off ramps to Brice so that traffic would stop close to the overpass and turn left or right, or building a new, separate access from southbound Brice to eastbound Tussing.

John Brandt, who was Reynoldsburg's economic-development director until 2008, said he thinks the problems with traffic on Brice Road are similar to those in the Sawmill Road area before the interchange at I-270 was redone in 2000.

One lesson that could be learned from the I-70/Brice Road area is that there were too many developers, said Mike Simpson, a real-estate agent with Ohio Equities who works in the area.

"There was a lack of a master plan," Simpson said.

The city of Columbus hasn't updated its land-use plan for the area since 1990.

But students in a landscape-architecture class at Ohio State University have come up with a plan, suggesting ideas such as a traffic circle at Brice and Tussing, new homes, sidewalks and a resort with a golf course at the Consumer Square site.

"It has potential. It's just a matter of finding a developer and government planning that would allow for this type of development," said Jesus J. Lara, the assistant professor who teaches the course.

Some of the retailers that once thrived along Brice Road closed their doors and built stores at the next I-70 interchange, at Rt. 256, which is closer to Pickerington.

The Target store is more visible from the highway there, Simpson said.

In one case, a movie theater was built near Consumer Square, only to be demolished within a few years.

The retail decline also has meant a plunge in tax revenue. RB-3 wants the land to be revalued at \$2.6 million, down from \$7.5 million.

The Franklin County Board of Revision is scheduled to hear the case, which dates to 2006, on Thursday.

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