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The Case FOR OLYMPIAN DRIVE

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Dear Citizens of Urbana and Champaign County,

There is a misleading public relations campaign against completing a much-needed road north of Urbana. Opponents have offered a number of arguments that do not stand up under close scrutiny.

Jobs: Which is better 4 jobs or 2,400 jobs + 4 jobs?

Businesses on Lincoln Avenue north of I-74 in Urbana have created over 900 jobs. In Champaign 1,500 jobs were created after completion of the Champaign portion of Olympian Drive. Completing the road north of Urbana from the railroad to U.S. 45 would spur job growth in both cities.

Opponents argue that a boutique goat farm which has created four jobs would be “destroyed”:

1. The goat farm would not be destroyed by a road 100 yards from its property line.
2. The operators don't even own the land but rent it from a farmer who wants the road.
3. The farmer told the goat farm operators 6 years ago that a road was planned. They rented the land anyway, and told him the road would help bring them customers. Now they oppose it.
4. Who should have a bigger voice, the renters or the farmer who owns the land?

A Tale of Two Dinners: \$150 at the Goat Farm or A Meal from the Food Bank?

1. The goat farm now advertises \$150 dinners, “The perfect gift for the farm to fork cognoscenti”.
2. Chicagoans drive here to dine while more and more local people seek help from the Food Bank.
3. Most local people cannot afford to pay \$150 for dinner for two. Many desperately need jobs.
4. Should Urbana be prevented from thoughtful contiguous economic development to provide hundreds-- or thousands-- of badly needed jobs because a business employing four people has decided a road might lessen the view for their epicurean patrons?
5. Should the taxpayers of Urbana and Champaign lose new revenue to pay for schools, fire and police because a few well-heeled diners might prefer not to see a two-lane road near a farm?

Economic Impact on Schools, Parks and County Government

The economies of Urbana, Champaign and Savoy support schools, parks, fire and police service. Who pays for county government? City taxpayers now pay 2/3 of the cost of County Government. Schools throughout the county now get a share of sales tax generated primarily in the cities. Economic growth and job creation occur overwhelmingly in the cities. A good road system is vital to any economy. We plan for arterial roads at intervals of 1 to 1 1/2 miles. The completion of Olympian Drive will provide an important link between I-57 and U.S. 45 for Urbana and northern Champaign County and will aid the economy of Champaign as well.

Public Safety

The local farmer who rents land to the goat farm operators wants Olympian Drive completed. It includes a bridge over the railroad tracks. Frequently emergency vehicles must wait 45 minutes for freight trains. He lost two buildings to fire in 1990 when firefighters were delayed.

Funding and Planning

The estimated cost of \$27 million comes from dedicated highway funds which cannot be used for other purposes. The Illinois Commerce Commission will pay for the bridge over the railroad tracks, the most expensive part of the project. Local match money will come from motor fuel tax funds. This project has been approved by all the necessary agencies after numerous public hearings and engineering studies. If we don't use these funds other cities will be happy to.

High Speed Rail

This community owes much of its existence to the construction of the railroad from Chicago in the 1850's. Champaign came into existence after the railroad was built. The cities of Urbana and Champaign were able to get the University of Illinois located here, partly because of the railroad. Now the United States, once a leader in railroads, lags behind much of the rest of the world which has invested in high-speed passenger rail. Our north-south route is the only one in Illinois capable of handling true high speed rail (220 miles per hour). The 2 ½ hour trip to Chicago would become 45 minutes. Olympian Drive would provide the bridge over the tracks required for high speed rail.

Effects on Agricultural Land

Farmers support the new road and bridge because it will make it easier for them to haul grain to the Anderson's. Opponents argue that we should preserve agricultural land at all cost. However, the land along the proposed route is not the highest quality farmland. It is where Big Grove, the original stand of trees once stood. The soil is best suited for trees. The trees were removed and much of the land is now used for corn and soybeans. The land became agricultural after completion of the great drainage projects of the 1870's. Before that much of Champaign County was swamp land.

Roads use up land but agriculture cannot exist without roads. Olympian Drive will not destroy any historic family farms. Farmer will still be able to farm land on both sides. The vast majority of farmers cross roads to get to all their fields. The road will be several hundred feet from the goat farm and will be designed to protect sensitive environmental areas. Trees can shield the view from extra fussy diners. (Is there enough good land to feed the world? Perhaps not if we insist on growing corn for ethanol and for high fructose corn syrup. That land can be shifted toward organic farming.)

Urbana understands the importance of using land wisely. We understand we have a responsibility to provide a high quality of life for the people who live here and to plan wisely for the future. Those who believe we cannot allow cities to grow should consider the decline of cities like Danville and Decatur.

People want to live in cities and throughout history have migrated from rural areas to cities. Cities have to carefully balance human needs in the economic, social and natural environments. Urbana is committed to thoughtful, sustainable growth. There is room for both the people who want to run a boutique farm and the many more people who need jobs from carefully planned new development.

Please feel free to call me if you have any questions, concerns or ideas on how we can do better.

