

Indianapolis Star Letter Spotlight

To the editor:

An editorial in the Feb. 14 *Indianapolis Star* declared that Indiana taxpayers deserve an impartial study of possible routes for extending Interstate 69 from Indianapolis to Evansville.

As a career engineer and the commissioner of the Indiana Department of Transportation, I can tell you an impartial study is exactly what taxpayers are going to get.

A new study that recently began will look at all reasonable alternatives – from building a highway on new terrain, to upgrading U.S. 41 and Interstate 70, to not building a highway at all.

While Governor Frank O'Bannon has long been on record as favoring a specific route, he stands firm in his conviction that the study must thoroughly and fairly examine all of the practical routes between Indianapolis and Evansville.

In addition, our nation's environmental laws require us to evaluate all reasonable alternatives. That means the study's resulting environmental impact statement will have to stand up to federal scrutiny. These checks and balances ensure that the study will be impartial.

It's true that an earlier study conducted by Bernardin, Lochmueller & Associates was withdrawn, but not, as the editorial suggested, because of the quality of the work that went into it. Rather, INDOT withdrew the study because we (not Bernardin, Lochmueller) had made its scope too narrow.

There's a good reason for that. When the original environmental studies began in 1990, INDOT focused on the one highway plan that seemed to make the most sense at the time. We needed a four-lane connection from Bloomington to Evansville, and it seemed logical to simply extend State Road 37, which already provided four lanes between Bloomington and Indianapolis.

At that time, the possibility of extending I-69 from Michigan to Texas was not on the table. Now that the federal government is committed to extending I-69, one

way or another, we need to broaden our scope, and that requires a much more comprehensive study.

Contrary to your editorial, INDOT did conduct a competitive selection process to choose the firm for the environmental impact work. In December 1998, INDOT solicited statements of interest for this contract in the same way we do for all professional services. Six companies responded. My fellow engineers, environmental staff and I weighed the experience, workload, capacity and expertise of those six applicants. Then we selected the best one for this project.

The editorial also referred to campaign contributions. Your readers might like to know that the only way I hear who makes campaign contributions is through an occasional news report. Political contributions are never a consideration in our selection process. Governor O'Bannon has instructed INDOT to hire consultants based solely on who can do the best job at a fair price. He does not meddle in the selection process, nor does he permit his staff to.

We at INDOT followed our usual strict, professional procedures in selecting the consultant for this project. I'd be happy to share those procedures with anyone who's interested.

INDOT has done business with Bernardin, Lochmueller & Associates since 1981 – during both Republican and Democratic administrations – and has complete confidence that the firm will conduct a totally professional and unbiased study.

BLA has nothing to gain from recommending one route over another. It will receive the same compensation for this study regardless of its finding. Moreover, its reputation is on the line, just as INDOT's is.

As we move forward with this study, we will soon be offering a Web site, a toll-free telephone number and other ways for interested citizens to voice their opinions. We urge Hoosiers to take advantage of these opportunities to tell us how we can serve them best.

Cristine M. Klika
Commissioner, Indiana Department of Transportation