

BROOKLYN

Big Creek Connects backs adding I-71 interchange

John Benson *Special to Sun News*

Roughly a decade has passed since the Big Creek/I-71 relocation and restoration study was completed. The study — which was recently updated — examined several environmental, economic and community challenges and opportunities in the heart of a highly urbanized area straddling the cities of Cleveland and Brooklyn. The takeaway proposed land-use changes that could significantly improve the character of the communities.

That's where greenway advocacy and watershed stewardship non-profit Big Creek Connects comes into the picture.

"When we looked at this, the question came up if the I-71 interchange at Denison (Avenue) doesn't have much of a purpose, and you have a nearby full interchange at Fulton (Road), does it really make sense to have that interchange?" Big Creek Connects Executive Director Bob Gardin said. "What about a full interchange at Ridge Road? Brooklyn was interested, Cleveland was interested. We got support from all our state reps and state senators in the area, as well as the sewer district, to do further study."

The study advocates for the removal of the Denison Access ramps from the abandoned Parma Freeway and paving the way for the naturalization of the Big Creek valley.

By re-routing the creek into its his-

toric streambed, vital ecosystems can be restored and over 70 acres of new greenspace can be created. These areas can feature recreational facilities and a connected trail system linking Brookside and Big Creek Reservations to local neighborhoods.

The study also highlights the economic potential of a new I-71 interchange at Ridge Road, designed to alleviate truck traffic from residential areas while spurring investment in the urban area.

"Brooklyn supports the idea of creating a full interchange at Ridge Road and I-71," Economic Development and Planning Director Jeremy Rowan said.

"The project would improve highway access for businesses in the northern part of the city and remove a significant amount of truck traffic on Ridge Road heading toward I-480."

The overall cost estimate to bring the initiative to fruition ranges from \$83.1 million to \$115.9 million.

"This is an impressive body of work and makes good sense," said Jim Rokakis, former Director, Thriving Communities Institute, former Cuyahoga County Treasurer and former Cleveland City Councilman, in a press release. "Now we have to find the will — and dollars — to make it happen."

Gardin said what's needed next is a transportation and economic study for the project. "The next step is for the cities to agree on how to do transportation and economic impact studies," he said.