

Expressway project still to cross some hurdles

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BANGALORE: Work on the Bangalore-Mysore Infrastructure Corridor Project (BMICP), which includes the 164-km Expressway, will begin by May this year, according to the construction company Nandi Infrastructure Corridor Enterprises Limited (NICE).

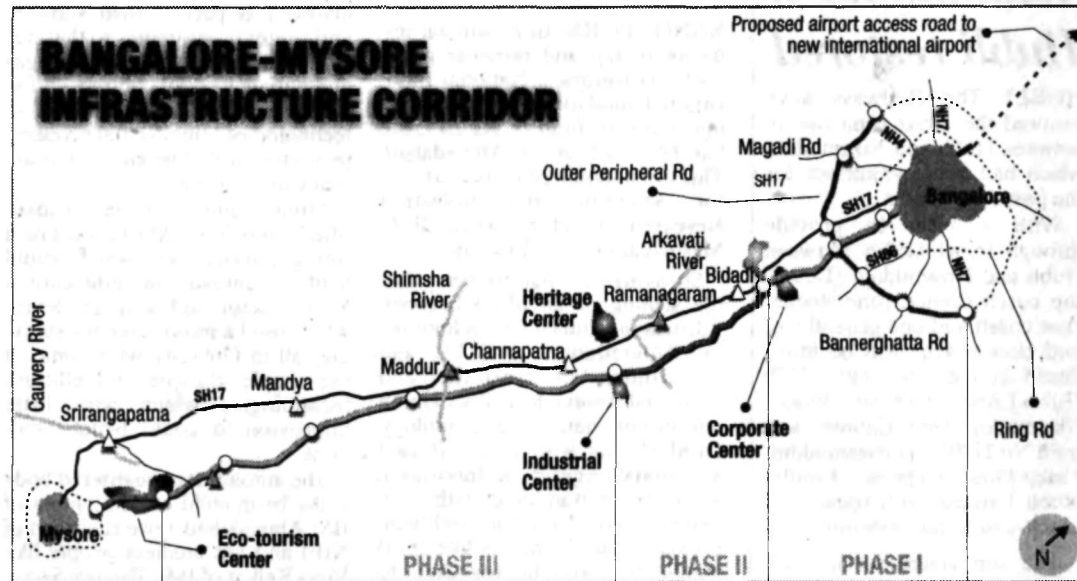
Chief Minister S.M. Krishna, after his recent meeting with the company, promised to speed up the project, whose officials have been going from pillar to post for the last five years.

"Our project has been cleared by three cabinets, personally viewed by three Chief Ministers — H.D. Deve Gowda, J.H. Patel and Krishna. And 207 bureaucrats have examined it at various levels. We have followed every single law in the book," claims NICE managing director and NRI Ashok Kheny.

The Rs 2000-crore project still has to cross a few more hurdles: environment clearance, toll-franchise agreement and relocation and rehabilitation plan.

Environmentalists led by Zafar Futehally, gave a memorandum to the CM on February 24, opposing the Expressway on the grounds that it goes through 6,000 acres of forest land, including Handigundi, B.M. Kaval and Chikkamanagudde reserve forests, rich with vegetation and wild life.

The construction company, on the basis of a study it commissioned and satellite pictures from the ISRO says: "There is 168 acres of



so-called designated forest, where already several people are indulging in private cultivation." The company also says it will take up compensatory afforestation in 420 acres around Ramanagara.

NICE is also facing public skepticism over tolls for the use of the proposed four-lane concrete road. In the case of the the Hubli-Dharwad bypass road, which NICE is presently constructing, the toll is Rs 55 for trucks, Rs 30 for light commercial vehicles and Rs 50 for multi-axle vehicles.

"The logic we have used is the cost of the diesel that is conserved

by taking the road. We have priced the tolls at half the amount saved," Kheny explains, adding that the toll-structure for the BMIC might be similar.

The proposal to set up five townships on approximately 20,000 acres of land which NICE plans to build around the BMIC has also provoked criticism. There is suspicion that the townships might turn out to be major real estate ventures.

"We are buying up land in guntas, not even acres. They are small bits of land, which cannot be profitably tilled for agriculture. The

farmers are grateful that we are buying this land from them. The five townships will also take industrial traffic away from the already over-crowded Bangalore. That is why this will be an infrastructure corridor, and not just an Expressway," Kheny says.

The Expressway will pass through 129 villages, and displace 1,100 homes. The company says displaced villagers will be accommodated in the townships, and will be paid compensation for the land at government-fixed rates. Farmers, however, are uneasy, especially about the proposed fencing of the

road which would not permit them easy access to their fields, a problem being faced around the Hubli-Dharwad Road too.

NICE, however, says that underpasses will be built for every 500 metres of the BMIC, while at Hubli-Dharwad a cart-track would be built on either side of the road. Kheny is still optimistic, five years down the line, that the project will definitely go through.

The Bangalore-Mysore Infrastructure Corridor Project has the following components:

Four expressways: 41 km linking National Highways 7 and 4; 111 km linking Bangalore and Mysore; 9 km linking the Bangalore-Mysore Expressway to state highway 17; 3 km of elevated expressway connecting the Link Road to downtown Bangalore.

Five townships: With built in schools, hospitals, parks and recreation and other facilities.

Corporate centre: A centre for corporate headquarters and research and development facilities.

Commercial centre: Home for retail light industry and municipal support services.

Industrial centre: Focal point for durable goods, industrial research and development.

Heritage centre: A lake surrounded by buildings which house arts, crafts, traditional healing facilities etc.

Eco-tourism centre: Environmental attractions, theme parks and cultural arts centre.