

Lipinski's Legacy in City Easy to Track; Orange Line Tops Transit Triumphs

December 26, 2004

By Rudolph Bush - Chicago Tribune

When retiring U.S. Rep. William Lipinski first ran for Congress in 1982, he had one goal in mind--building a train line.

When he looked around Chicago, he saw only one section of the city without any elevated train tracks--the neighborhoods around Midway Airport, where he grew up and would serve his entire political life.

As an alderman in the 1970s and early 1980s, he broached the idea of what would become the CTA's Orange Line with city officials, and although some funds trickled in, it wasn't nearly enough to fund the massive public works project.

"It became clear to me that the only way I was going to be able to get the money to build the Southwest Side Rapid Transit System was to go to Washington and bring the money back home," he said recently, reflecting on the 22 years he served as congressman and 23rd Ward Democratic committeeman.

In the end, Lipinski, 67, brought home money not only for the Orange Line, but also billions of dollars in federal projects that cross the state. He steered clear of the ideological battles of Congress while concentrating on the more pragmatic work befitting a man who never strayed far from the world of Chicago ward politics.

One of the state's most influential representatives in Washington, Lipinski leaves office after the new year with an enormous physical legacy of highways and train lines he got funded. But he also departs to a strain of controversy over his role in engineering the selection of his son, Dan, to fill his seat.

Dan Lipinski handily won his father's seat in November without having to face a primary opponent beforehand because the elder Lipinski left his own name on the March ballot and then waited until he was easily renominated to announce his retirement. Bowing to William Lipinski's wishes, party officials then handpicked his son to run in his place in the general election.

The result was a firestorm of criticism from Republicans and even some Democrats, the most fierce and personal Lipinski endured in his entire congressional career.

If the critics want to attack somebody it should be him, not his son, he said.

"In a perfect world he would have run in a primary election but unfortunately there were a lot of people, Democrats and Republicans, who did not want me to retire until the highway bill passed."

The massive \$275 billion bill, a reauthorization of the nation's entire federal transportation funding, would have been Lipinski's crowning achievement but it languished in Congress this year and ultimately didn't pass.

Lipinski's role was key in seeing the bill through the House and in conference with the Senate.

"I held off [on retiring] as long as I thought was possible," he said.

Nevertheless, his timing was convenient to his son, although Lipinski believes they both will be vindicated.

"I don't think it will tarnish my legacy because I think he will prove to be an outstanding congressman," he said.

Whether Dan Lipinski, an author and political science professor, has the innate political gifts of his father remains to be seen.

Within the Illinois congressional delegation, the elder Lipinski is known as the quintessential ward politician, a man who never finished college but built his career with a shrewd intuition about government and an ability to get things done.

"He just had common sense in the various assignments he took on," said Cook County Commissioner John Daley, a longtime friend and political backer.

Beginnings of political life

The son of a Chicago bus driver and a secretary, Lipinski attended two years of college in Iowa and played on the basketball team. But when he took a summer job with the Chicago Park District after his sophomore year, his collegiate career ended and his political life began.

From working as a physical education instructor, he became a playground supervisor in his own 23rd Ward and joined the ward Democratic Party organization. Ultimately, he supervised both Hale and Marquette Parks, getting to know the neighborhood residents and the local political bosses.

By the early 1970s, he was running then Ald. Frank Kuta's press office. When Kuta had to step down because of a corruption conviction in 1974, Lipinski beat out a crowded field to take his

place.

Thinking back on Kuta's conviction and the greased-palm style of politics, Lipinski said he didn't know how to discuss the corruption he often saw around him.

"It has existed for my entire career," he said.

When he was first elected alderman, several people came into his office and offered to let him "indulge in activity that would be considered illegal."

"That idea was rebuffed and after a few times they stopped coming," he said.

While in the City Council, Lipinski decided to back the Daley family in their political pursuits and they, in turn, backed him when he decided to run for Congress in 1982.

"That was a very bitter contest when he ran because he was running against an incumbent," John Daley said.

In the Democratic primary, Lipinski defeated U.S. Rep. John Fary, who was backed by Mayor Jane Byrne, the main political rival to Daley's brother, then-State's Atty. Richard M. Daley.

But to Lipinski, the political battle between Byrne and the Daleys had little to do with his run for Congress. For him, it was all about the train line.

"That was going to cause very significant economic development on the Southwest Side of Chicago," he said.

In what is now a well-known political story, Lipinski achieved what he considered his career-long dream of building the Orange Line in only his second term.

Lipinski was a staunch anti-Communist who broke with Democratic ranks in 1986 to vote with Republican President Ronald Reagan to fund Nicaraguan Contra rebels in their fight against the communist Sandinista government.

The vote earned him a call from the president, who asked if there was anything he could do in return.

Lipinski now credits divine intervention with putting the right words in his mouth.

"Thanks to the good Lord, I said, "Mr. President, have you ever heard of the Southwest Side Rapid Transit System?"

Eight weeks later, the head of the federal mass transit division was handing over a ceremonial check for \$485 million.

Bipartisan worker

In many ways, the story is a paradigm for how Lipinski managed to accomplish so much throughout his career.

Always willing to work across party lines and always ready with the right phrase or a quid pro quo, he was able to push through funding and legislation to revive Midway Airport, expand O'Hare International Airport, reconstruct the Stevenson Expressway and provide record federal dollars for CTA and Metra.

Of all of those projects, he considers his greatest achievement a simple levy that is tacked onto every plane ticket sold in the country.

The \$3-a-head passenger-facility charge has funded improvements at airports across the nation, he said.

Along the way, Lipinski has served as the liaison for Republicans and Democrats both in the Illinois congressional delegation.

"He played a major role in keeping the Illinois delegation working together," said David Yudin, who was the City of Chicago's chief lobbyist from 1992 to 2004. "He would bring people in and say this is what you have got to do and would make sure people were doing what had to be done."

When the congressional delegation was faced with redrawing its districts, it was Lipinski who sat down with House Speaker Dennis Hastert and worked out a deal that not only protected most of the state's incumbents but also spared Chicago from losing a seat.

When it came to expanding O'Hare, Lipinski went to then-Gov. George Ryan and persuaded him to come out publicly for the expansion at a time when many state Republicans opposed it.

Ryan had testified against the expansion before a congressional committee. Despite that, Lipinski said the former Republican governor had confided that he was secretly for it.

"He was always willing to work with me on it as long as he never had to come out publicly for it," he said.

Blunt and plainspoken, Lipinski was a deep social conservative in a Democratic Party that trended liberal on social policies. He often wasn't a reliable vote for his party, but still had respect in the party and among Republicans.

"The interesting thing about Bill is that he has friends not only from all factions of the party but all factions of Congress," said U.S. Rep. Jan **Schakowsky**, a Democrat from Evanston. "I think that he has a unique ability to think in terms more of results than in terms of party politics or ideology."

Time to move on

While many of his colleagues encouraged him to stay in Congress, Lipinski felt the time had come to move on.

In October, he knew he had made the right decision when his doctor revealed that he had considerable calcium build-up in the arteries of his heart, something that required the insertion of three stents to treat.

A smoker his entire adult life, he has since quit, he says.

Although Lipinski is certain to advise his son, he expects to leave the stress of Washington behind and won't move from the Southwest Side of Chicago, where he has returned almost every weekend throughout his career.

And although every day he drives around the city he can see the fruits of his labor, he doesn't consider any of them his greatest testament.

"My greatest satisfaction is the support I've gotten from my constituents," he said. "They never turned against me despite the controversy of my son succeeding me."