

Road Dollars Now in State's Hands

Schakowsky Helps Secure Current and Future Funding for Area Projects

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The Illinois Congressional delegation says their efforts have paid off in the form of millions of highway and transit dollars for road, rail and bridge projects.

Those efforts include funding for significant projects in Skokie and Evanston, officials said.

Congress approved a new \$286.4 billion federal transportation package last week that also includes authorization for future funding of the Skokie Swift extension project, which would create stops at Oakton Street and Old Orchard Road.

Illinois scored big in this federal transportation legislation. It stands to get \$1.23 billion per year in the new legislation, a boost of \$300 million from the previous legislation in which Illinois received \$927 million.

"This is a long-awaited and welcome bipartisan bill," said U.S. Rep. Jan **Schakowsky**, D-9th. "For (this area), enactment means resurfaced and safer roads, new bicycle and walking paths, expanded el service and shorter commutes."

Schakowsky promised that her constituents will notice "a real difference" when the projects are completed.

"This transportation bill funds preservation and beautification efforts in residential neighborhoods and commercial corridors in my district and will put people to work in new jobs on transportation projects throughout Illinois and the country. The bill will make automobiles safer by offering new protections to reduce accidents and protect children and crash victims."

Although money was not specifically earmarked for the Skokie Swift extension project, the bill includes important authorization for future funding.

Schakowsky spokesman Jon Samuels said this was "an important first and necessary step" to allow for future funding. He said Schakowsky will work closely with the CTA and Mayor George Van Dusen to make sure the project moves forward.

In March, the village learned it will receive a federal grant of about \$417,000 to help pay for the design of the downtown Oakton Street station for the Skokie Swift.

The grant comes from the federal Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality improvement program and is administered by the Chicago Area Transportation Study.

Building an el stop on Oakton Street has become a major project for Skokie following the sale of the 28-acre Pfizer Pharmaceuticals property to developer Forest City, which is creating a life sciences research park. The Skokie Swift station would be located next to the property and would be ideal for employees coming to and leaving work.

The CTA has supported both the Oakton station and the extension of the line even if it has not committed funding, officials say. A letter from CTA President Frank Kruesi released by the village states, "By extending (the Skokie Swift) north, and providing infill stations, the CTA will make better use of existing service capacity and provide expanded reverse commute opportunities."

Brad Hahn, spokesman for U.S. Rep. J. Dennis Hastert, R-14th, said cooperation among members of the state's Congressional delegation was the key.

"The Illinois delegation didn't fare so well in 1998. The delegation made a commitment to do better this time. Speaker Hastert led the efforts to reach across the aisle to ensure the rate of return is better," Hahn said.

The state will now need to come up with matching dollars to ensure that Illinois gets the federal funding. The new funding formula could double the state's responsibility to 40 percent. Previously, the federal government would fund 80 percent of the project cost and states were responsible for 20 percent.

Jim Reilly, chairman of the Regional Transportation Authority, which oversees CTA, Metra and Pace, said the state will need to come up with \$500 million a year to match and that won't be easy.

"The Congressional delegation did a magnificent job. Now it's our turn. We're a long way from having a plan to present to the Legislature, and it'll be 18 months before we do. It will have to include a tax of some sort. It's not magic. We need the revenues. The state itself is having budgetary problems," he said.

President Bush is expected to sign the bill into law this week.