

Federal Road Bill Contains Much for Area

BY ANDREA L. BROWN - Evanston Review

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Who could benefit from a \$275 billion federal highway bill?

Clearly, Illinois, says local representatives.

"When you look at this bill, the average state receives 12 percent. Illinois received 28 percent," said U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, R-10th.

The House passed the bill April 2, 357-65, and now it must be reconciled with a \$318 billion transportation bill from the Senate. Congressional leaders are negotiating a compromise that a majority in both the House and the Senate would support.

Among the 204 Illinois projects are a number that officials here have been lobbying for, including \$3 million for improvements to Ridge Avenue, a \$2 million improvement to Sheridan Road from Isabella Street to the Chicago border; and bike path improvements totaling \$250,000.

If the bill passes, "this is a win-win for my district and our state," said U.S. Rep. Jan Schakowsky, D-9th.

"Throughout the 9th Congressional District, I am proud to have worked to secure funding for projects to ease congestion, reduce commute times, invest in alternative transportation and improve safety," Schakowsky said. "These funds will help us to preserve and to beautify our commercial and residential corridors, while generating new jobs in our district.

"Along with the badly needed infrastructure improvements, the bill, the Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (TEA LU), will also result in jobs.

"TEA LU will help accomplish both of these critical goals," Schakowsky said.

Local state representatives are keeping watch on the bill, too, because the funds once approved go through the transit agencies and state Department of Transportation.

"It ultimately benefits our communities," said State Rep. Julie Hamos, D-18th, of Evanston, who has been a major force at the state level, pushing for more uniform service.

Hamos, for instance, has been pushing the Regional Transportation Authority and other transit agencies to create a universal fare care so that riders can transfer from different fare lines without facing different rules and fees.

Some other projects to be created under the new bill include the construction of a western entrance to O'Hare International Airport near Devon or Thorndale avenues, widening Quentin Road between Lake-Cook Road and Dundee Road in Palatine; and starting work on the Metra STAR line. (See related story.)

Federal gas tax receipts would pay for the projects.

Although President George W. Bush has threatened to veto the proposed legislation, U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, R-10th, said this revised version may prove more to the President's liking.

Last year's version proposed general fund spending and a 12-cent-per-gallon gas tax.

"I think the President was very right to be concerned about that legislation," Kirk said. "We have now pulled it down from \$374 billion to \$275 billion. I think it reflects the right balance of taking care of the country's infrastructure and boosting employment.

"This bill was also seen as a jobs program," he added. "Transportation spending translates directly to more jobs."

Kirk said he expects final legislation will be passed in mid-October.

In staking their claim, state leaders argued Illinois is a transportation crossroads that serves all regions of the United States.

In the past, Illinois received less money than it has collected in federal highway dollars, due to a formula that determines how the money is distributed.

"The federal highway funding formula has become a very complex and political document," Kirk said.

If funding were distributed strictly according to highway miles, then Alaska would receive the most money. If population were the determining factor, most of the money would go to California. One of the reason Illinois fares so well this time is how the formula was revised.

Kirk said Illinois' boon in the House version is a "testament" to the cooperation of two Illinois congressman on this proposed legislation -- Speaker Dennis Hastert, R-14th, and Rep. William Lipinski, D-3rd.

"In the past, Illinois has had partisan warfare that undermined our overall effort," Kirk said. "This time the Republicans and Democrats worked together. Illinois did very, very well."

Schakowsky praised Lipinski's role.

"I commend Congressman Bill Lipinski for his leadership and for helping to provide our district and Illinois much needed federal transportation funds," she said. "It is a shame, however, that President Bush is threatening to veto both the House and Senate bills at a time when our nation is in desperate need of jobs."

The House bill would bring more road projects to Illinois than the Senate version, so Kirk said Illinois congressional leaders must remain united.

"What I expect they will do is the Senate will come down to the House number," Kirk said. "What we need to is make sure the House formulas, which advantage Illinois, are the final ones."

IDOT control

The meat of the House bill lies in road projects.

Developing the list of projects began two and a half years ago, Kirk said.

Most of the projects would involve federal money funding 50 percent of the projects, with state and local governments kicking in the remaining half. Transit projects typically involve 70 percent federal funding and 30 percent local contribution.

About 90 percent of the House bill's dollars would pass directly through the Illinois Department of Transportation or the city of Chicago.

In some cases, the money would fund projects that are now part of IDOT's five-year road construction plan, said Dick Smith, IDOT director of planning and programming.

Those projects would almost certainly begin earlier than now scheduled, he said. Even so, land-acquisition negotiations and developing engineering plans could still hold up some projects despite new federal funding.