

State Needs More Federal Transit Dollars

Bob Seidenberg - Evanston Review

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Business leaders and legislators expressed similar views Monday in seeing that Illinois receives its fair share of funding on the next federal transportation bill to help reduce highway congestion, improve public transit and address other needs.

The special forum on transportation at Northwestern University in Evanston featured U.S. Rep. Jan Schakowsky, D-9th, along with business and transit leaders, who discussed the importance of transit funds to the region's economic well-being.

Business Leaders for Transportation, a coalition of 180 members representing some 12,000 regional employers, said Illinois ranks as the fifth most congested state in the country, with commuters spending an average of 61 hours a year just waiting in traffic.

"Service-oriented economies depend on the talents of people, and people stuck in traffic equals money lost," said Peter Glick, first vice president for LaSalle Capital Markets.

To date, however, Illinois puts much more into the system than it receives in return, said Jim LaBelle, Metropolis 2020 deputy director. Metropolis co-leads Business Leaders for Transportation along with the Metropolitan Planning Council and the Chicagoland Chamber of Commerce.

It is time, LaBelle said, to make "Illinois a donor" rather than a "donee."

Schakowsky said investment in transportation "is a sure-fire way to create jobs" and revitalize the economic system.

She said she would support a 5-cent increase in the gasoline tax to generate some of the additional dollars.

Another speaker was Paula Thibeault, executive director of the Regional Transportation Authority. Bob Gallamore, director of Northwestern's Transportation center, moderated the forum.

Thibeault said 50 percent of the RTA's revenue comes through the fare box.

"We consider that to be the backbone of our financial security," she said.

Prudent financial practices, she said, have enabled to agency to ride out a difficult economy.

Federal transportation dollars provide a portion of the RTA's funding, which in turn allocates money to the Chicago Transit Authority.

"We look at it as a competitive pot of money and we want to get as much for Illinois as we can get," she said.

During a brief question period, though, several speakers raised questions about lack of funding for CTA stations in the Edgewater and Uptown areas of Chicago, saying they have worked for years on the problem, without success.

Peter Nicholson, a member of Evanston's Transportation Future, a group that holds educational forums and advocates on local transportation issues, asked panelists what was being done to streamline the current funding system.

"The entire process just seems to take so long and as a result projects end up costing more than they have to," he said.

Thibeault said the speed that projects are acted upon are "pretty much determined by the dollars you have to fund those projects In Illinois." As a result, groups need to have projects "ready to move, so you can get them in there and get that funding agreement signed," she said.

But Nicholson said afterward that he was referring to projects such as the viaduct restorations in Evanston.

Schakowsky and other legislators voiced protests earlier this year over the CTA's failure to carry through on a pledge to fix railroad viaducts that are among the poorest in the system.

CTA officials have since committed to fixing a second viaduct in addition to the one at Main Street, and carrying out design work on the others.

The problem, Nicholson said, is "once you get the funding the process takes so long that somebody sees that big pot of money sitting there and they take it for something else."

In the case of the viaducts, CTA officials said they had to use earmarked viaduct dollars for more pressing needs, because of a lack of funding.