

Pols snub CTA press conference

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Was it a boycott or were area legislators just too busy to attend the Chicago Transit Authority's press conference last Thursday, announcing the city's new bus routes?

"None of us were there," said State Sen. Jeffrey Schoenberg, D-9th, among the legislators who snubbed the press conference because of their dissatisfaction with the CTA on the city's deteriorating viaducts.

And CTA President Frank Kruesi may have thrown more fuel on their anger, denying that the CTA had ever made a commitment to fix all six of the city's viaducts.

At the press conference, held in front of the Davis Street commuter station, Kruesi maintained that the CTA only gave assurances to rebuild the Main Street viaduct, and would get to the others as money becomes available.

CTA officials had called a press conference nearly four years ago - attended by Secretary of Transportation Kirk Brown, CTA officials, the **Review** and others - announcing plans to use

Illinois FIRST funds to repair the viaducts.

The viaducts, by the CTA's own estimates, are among the worst in the transit system.

Kruesi denied that a commitment was ever made by the CTA.

"There was supposedly a conversation ... a state elected official had with a member of the General Assembly," he said, "but it was not the CTA. What the CTA committed to, what I specifically committed to, was to get the viaduct (at Main Street) done and obviously go forward as much as we can on the others."

While legislators were not present at last Thursday's press conference, their aides, handed out copies of a letter from a CTA official Feb. 27 - which the **Review** disclosed earlier - informing Evanston Mayor Lorraine H. Morton that "initially, design and construction funding for six viaducts in Evanston (Main, Dempster, Greenleaf, Davis, Church and Grove) was included in the CTA's 2002-2006 Capital Improvement Program.

"During preparation of the 2003-2007 CIP, however, it became necessary to reprogram resources for the CIP in order to meet emerging and increased needs across the system," wrote Suzanne M. Te Beau, the CTA's vice president for government affairs and affirmative action.

All the city's legislators or their representatives - had met with Kruesi and other CTA officials several months ago, pressing the need for repairs of the viaducts.

Schoenberg; U.S. Rep. Jan Schakowsky, D-9th; State Rep. Julie Hamos, D-18th; and Cook County Commissioner Lawrence Suffredin, D-13th, said the viaducts rank among the poorest in the CTA system.

In fact, the 15 viaducts that are regarded in "poorest condition" all fall within Schakowsky's 9th Congressional District, either here or in Chicago.

"My constituents are facing a dangerous and serious public safety hazard every day the CTA delays action to renovate viaducts in Evanston and across the system," she said.

Hamos, who is a key player on regional transportation plans in Springfield, said legislators were supportive of the CTA and the state's massive Illinois First transportation program "specifically because we understood that the Evanston community would benefit greatly through the repair of viaducts," she said.

Schoenberg said that if Kruesi had said "that the CTA had some unanticipated pressing financial needs and therefore needed to push back the timing of the viaduct repairs, I would have been disappointed, but certainly would have understood.

"However, it almost defies the imagination that four years to the day" from the CTA's announcement it planned to embark on the viaduct plan, "Mr. Kruesi is attempting to revise history."

Schoenberg, a key member Senate Appropriations Committee who also chaired a House Appropriations committee before being elected to the upper chamber last year, said he was "furious with the suggestion that there was some sort of misunderstanding."

"Everything else on my Illinois FIRST list has been either executed or is in the works," he said.

"It's going to take more than a bus route and pat on the head to satisfy our interests," he said of legislators' concerns. "The physical safety of our neighbors and those who work in Evanston is at risk because of the CTA's amnesia."

"The most important thing is that these viaducts are rebuilt and reconstructed on a priority basis," he said.

The CTA moved a few years ago to do some temporary shoring up of the Dempster Street viaduct, where structural integrity apparently was an issue.

CTA officials acknowledge that the poor condition of the viaducts has caused slower train speeds.

At the close of the press conference, Kruesi, after some brief words from Mayor Lorraine H. Morton, acknowledged that the Evanston viaducts are among the worst in the CTA system.

"We're anxious to get work underway, both in the viaducts here and also to improve the quality of speed of service," he said. "There are a great many of capital needs throughout the system. Many are concentrated in Evanston, partly because there is so much concentration of service here."