

Legislators snub CTA over Evanston repairs; Rebuilding sought of 6 old viaducts

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By Courtney Flynn

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Charging that the Chicago Transit Authority reneged on plans to rebuild six crumbling viaducts in Evanston, a group of local lawmakers on Thursday boycotted a CTA news conference at which new bus routes were announced.

The CTA committed in 1999 to fix the viaducts--among the most dilapidated in the transit system--but has not followed through, the lawmakers said.

"It's going to take a lot more than a new bus route and a pat on the head to satisfy our interests," said state Sen. Jeffrey Schoenberg (D-Evanston), who hunkered down in his Evanston office during the CTA's news conference across the street.

"We need to have this done before someone gets hurt or killed or service is seriously disrupted," he said.

Among the other invited no-shows were state Rep. Julie Hamos (D-Evanston) and Cook County Commissioner Larry Suffredin. U.S. Rep. Jan **Schakowsky** (D-Ill.), who supports the others, was in Washington.

While CTA officials acknowledge that the viaducts under the Purple Line at Main, Dempster, Greenleaf, Davis, Church and Grove Streets need repair, they say the structures, which date to 1909, pose no danger to riders.

CTA President Frank Kruesi said the agency agreed to rebuild only the Main Street viaduct, where work is expected to begin in spring 2004.

"As to the question of whether the CTA committed to rebuild the other viaducts, my answer to that is no," Kruesi said. "We did commit to doing Main [Street] and we committed to do whatever other ones we can."

The CTA called the news conference to announce a six-month pilot program for three new bus routes that would replace three routes and modify four others in the north suburbs and Chicago's Far North Side.

The changes are designed to improve connections between the bus routes and "L" lines, increase the frequency of service and establish Saturday service on two streets, officials said.

As for the viaduct repairs, the Main Street project, estimated at \$7.5 million, will be funded by former Gov. George Ryan's Illinois FIRST program to repair infrastructure.

Soon after Illinois FIRST was launched in 1999, the CTA agreed to use money from that program to fix all six viaducts, the lawmakers said.

Kruesi disputed the claim.

"We've got a lot of unmet capital needs throughout the system, many of them in Evanston, and we need to get to those and we need to have the funds to be able to do so," Kruesi said. "I can't commit to spend money I don't have."

Local officials on Thursday offered a letter and a proposed budget report, which they said proved their point that the CTA had earmarked money for the viaduct repairs.

The Feb. 27, 2003, letter to Evanston Mayor Lorraine Morton from Suzanne Te Beau, the CTA's vice president of government affairs and affirmative action, said design and construction funding originally was included for the six viaducts.

But in light of increased needs across the CTA system, the funds were diverted, Te Beau wrote in the letter.

The six viaducts would still receive 30 percent funding for design work, and all of the construction costs for the Main Street viaduct would be covered, the letter said.

In addition to the letter, the group also noted that a line item in the proposed fiscal 2001-05 CTA capital program shows a five-year, \$33 million funding plan to repair viaducts along the Purple Line.

"Don't come to my neighborhood and tell me it never happened," Schoenberg said. "I don't know where this sudden case of amnesia came from."

CTA spokeswoman Robyn Ziegler said the information contained in the letter and proposed capital program was based on projections, not commitments.

As costs increase or the need for other projects becomes more urgent, the CTA must balance and evaluate the requirements of the entire system, she said.

Said Hamos: "I think they found other priorities for funding over the years and I think they would find them forever if we didn't rise up and make ourselves a priority."

Kruesi said he still hopes to secure funding for the five viaducts with the help of federal, state and local elected officials.