

(February 26, 2007) The Crossroads of a Career - Congressman Dan Lipinski

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By Guy Tridgell Staff writer

U.S. Rep. Daniel Lipinski understands he will be defined by what he does with "The Hump."

The nickname for the raised tracks in the sprawling Chicago Belt Railway yard in Chicago's Clearing community, "The Hump" is used to position train cars starting and ending their journeys in and out of the city.

It also is one of the biggest obstacles to building a Central Avenue bypass, a new north-south street discussed for more than three decades as the solution to the Southwest Side's traffic congestion.

"I hear more about this than any other issue," Lipinski said amid the squeal and groans of passing trains. "I hear more about Central Avenue than the Iraq war."

But Lipinski, a Democrat in his second term representing the 3rd Congressional District, finally feels like he can do something about it.

At the start of the latest legislative session, he was named to the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee. He becomes the only congressman from the Chicago area on the committee, which controls the purse strings to billions of dollars in federal transportation spending.

Among their chief responsibilities, committee members devise the formulas that determine how gas taxes are meted out to the states. They also write legislation every six years that decides which megaprojects get the green light for federal money. The next bill will be written in 2009.

The Western Springs resident will be following in the familiar footsteps of his predecessor.

Lipinski's father, William O. Lipinski, used his perch on the Transportation Committee during his 22 years in Congress to

score tons of pork for the area. Without him, the revitalization of Midway Airport and the construction of the Chicago Transit Authority's Orange Line would not have happened.

As the lone representative for the Chicago area on the committee, the son likewise will be looked upon to do the heavy lifting for transit, highways and airports back home.

"You play a big role deciding where all of that funding is going to go," Lipinski said. "It is very important for this area to have someone on the committee. Every time a slot came open, I went and talked to Nancy Pelosi."

He still has a long way to go.

Lipinski ranks 25th in seniority of the 41 Democrats on the 75-person committee.

Lipinski also continues to be dogged by criticism he was handed his Congressional seat after his father engineered to get him on the ballot following his 2004 retirement. The longer Lipinski sticks around and builds influence, however, the more the complaints about the path he took to Congress subside.

"I always believed when I first started running for Congress, that the biggest way to make your mark at home was through transportation," he said from his district office, a storefront in a brick Archer Avenue strip mall. "It was the most important thing to me, getting on that committee."

He really didn't have much choice.

For the past 50 years, the Southwest Side was represented by someone on the Transportation Committee. Before the elder Lipinski, John Fary and John Kluczynski served on the panel.

Roosevelt University political scientist Paul Green said the relationship can be traced to the beginnings of Midway Airport, which opened as one of the country's first commercial airports in 1926.

Green said Congress often is viewed as a step down from Chicago's City Hall.

That's not the case for the congressman representing the airport, a facility city hall has fought for years to preserve.

"Transportation is a great committee. It brings a lot of jobs and a lot of money to the city," Green said. "And those kind of jobs always are very important to that district."

His father was famous for learning the minutia of projects he sponsored.

Lipinski conceded he has some learning to do.

During recent committee seminars to educate new members on transportation issues, Lipinski claimed to be one of five or six representatives to attend. The rest of the audience were congressional staffers, he said.

"I really want to understand these issues as we deal with them, the ins and outs and what is the best policy," Lipinski said. "It certainly has been a learning curve."

To expedite that process, he is surrounding himself with his father's old staff. Last month, he hired as his chief of staff Jason Tai, who also happened to be his father's chief of staff before taking a job in state government.

Lipinski said he still confers with this father, whom he called a "unique resource."

He acknowledged worries he will be viewed as a mere extension of his father.

"I do have personal concerns whether people can separate what I do and what my father did," he said. "It is a huge shadow. Everyone knows what he did for transportation in the Chicago area. It was almost going to be easier for me not to go into transportation.

"But when it gets down to it, I can get things done for the city and the district."

There are some differences.

Lipinski, a former University of Tennessee professor, is missing his father's trademark gruffness. An Apple laptop in his office and an ever-present Blackberry are new.

Lipinski also is developing his own list of things to do.

The proposed privatization of Midway Airport will be a hot topic this year.

He also promises to fight for the expansion of the Orange Line to the Ford City mall.

But the Central Avenue bypass tops the list.

Plans call for building an underpass starting at 55th Street, which will add another north-south street to cut down on traffic along Harlem and Cicero Avenue.

Lipinski said \$130 million is budgeted in federal funds for the project. To finish the job, \$100 million more needs to be found somewhere.

"If you want to get it done, you have to make it a personal priority," he said. "The need has always been there, but the traffic is getting worse."

His new committee is the perfect place to make sure the improvements happen.

"I really feel like I will be able to get things done here," Lipinski said.