

(September 21, 2007) Central Underpass Is Discussed

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Lipinski Hosts Breakfast Meeting with Local Politicians

By DERMOT CONNOLLY

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Cong. Dan Lipinski (D-3rd) hosted a breakfast meeting for local political leaders on Saturday to discuss transportation issues, chief among them his intention to bring to fruition the long-discussed Central Avenue link between Chicago and the suburbs aimed at relieving traffic congestion on existing routes.

Those joining Lipinski at a banquet facility in Bridgeview's Toyota Park included Milt Sees, the new secretary of the Illinois Department of Transportation, Ald. Lona Lane (18th) and Ginger Rugai (19th), and the mayors of several area suburbs.

Issues such as improving local roads and the many railroad crossings in the area were discussed, and Lipinski said that for any of the work to be done, it was of prime importance for the Illinois Legislature to pass the capital improvements bill that was under consideration this week.

Lawmakers this week were considering the \$24.5 billion capital-improvements plan backed by Gov. Blagojevich. In addition to funding improvements to roads and bridges statewide, the new monies would also go toward mass transit, as well as building schools.

The bill, which would pay for the programs through a major expansion of gambling, including casinos in Chicago, passed in the state Senate on Tuesday but the House has yet to approve it.

Lane said that 16 railroad crossings pass through her ward, including some along the city borders with Hometown and Evergreen Park, and Sees advised her to work with with her local state representatives and senators.

"I did get a \$25,000 grant to put up a fence at the railroad crossing at 83rd and Rockwell (the site of a pedestrian fatality a few years ago), but no one wants to maintain it," said the alderman.

However, the main topic of discussion was the Central Avenue project.

Because there is no north-south thoroughfare between Cicero Avenue and - three miles west - Harlem Avenue - both those main arteries are often clogged with car and truck traffic.

And solving that problem by connecting the city and suburban sections of Central Avenue, now divided by railroad tracks in Bedford Park, has long been a goal of many local politicians, including Lipinski's father, the former Cong. Bill Lipinski.

Money had been set aside for the project since the 1970s, when it was first proposed during Richard J. Daley's administration, but most of those funds were used to construct the CTA's Orange Line train to Midway Airport in the 1990s.

The proposed project has long been referred to as the "Central Avenue Overpass," but Lipinski and others at the meeting said engineers have determined that for several reasons, it would be more economical to build an underpass connecting Central Avenue, which is cut off by railroad tracks south of 65th Street in Bedford Park and picks up again near the Burbank border, at about 71st Street.

"We have \$126 million right now," said Lipinski, noting that within the last year, he was able to secure \$100 million in federal funding for CREATE, the Chicago Region Environmental and Transportation Efficiency Program.

The ultimate cost of the project has not been determined because it keeps going up as the years go by, but officials said it could be at least \$300 million, which the state would pay about a third.

Someone at the meeting suggested that the money should just be used for improving exiting roads, but that idea was shot down.

"We just selected an engineering firm, and it is on the five-year plan for IDOT," said Lipinski,

"It is a top priority for me," said the congressman, noting that residents he had spoken to at an event in Clearing earlier that day were very interested in seeing it finally happen.

"This has been talked about for a long time. And having grown up in the Garfield Ridge neighborhood, I know how important it is to the community," said Lipinski.

"Now it is time for the state of Illinois to come through," he added. "It is critical to get a capital improvements bill passed in Springfield."

"We're going to continue looking for funding sources," said Sees, the IDOT secretary.

Lipinski joked that if the project is completed while he is in office, he can brag to his father that even though they both worked on it over the years, "I got it done."

Armon Schmidt, a 50-year Clearing resident and businessman, has been a longtime proponent of the project and is encouraged by the progress being made now.

"When we were being told it couldn't be done, I said 'we put men on the moon. We are sending people 250 miles from Earth in space shuttles and we can't get people from 65th and Central to 73rd and Central?' I don't believe it."

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