
(January 29, 2009) Southtown Star: Stimulus bill could pay for Chicago-area transit projects

Money must be spent in six months; state doesn't need to match funding

<http://www.southtownstar.com/news/1403174,012909stimulus.article>

The U.S. House of Representatives on Wednesday added \$3 billion for public transportation to the massive economic stimulus bill moving through Congress, adopting an amendment co-sponsored by Rep. Dan Lipinski (D-3rd).

Lipinski and fellow U.S. Reps. Bobby Rush (D-1st), Jesse Jackson Jr. (D-2nd) and Debbie Halvorson (D-11th) voted for the stimulus bill Wednesday evening. Rep. Judy Biggert (R-13th) opposed the measure, which passed with no Republican support.

About \$100 million of the extra \$3 billion would go to Illinois, with about \$76 million directed to Chicago area transit agencies, according to Lipinski. The money could be used for stations and vehicles, among other things.

Local transit agencies also would have an opportunity to compete for \$1.5 billion to be doled out by the federal Department of Transportation, now headed by former downstate Rep. Ray LaHood. That money could be used to extend Metra or Chicago Transit Authority lines.

The House version of the stimulus bill, now pegged at \$819 billion, contains about \$46 billion for transportation, \$12 billion of which is for public transit.

Illinois is in line to receive about \$1 billion for roads and \$640 million for transit.

Many of the road projects likely to be paid for by the bill "are not big, sexy, new projects, because they have to be ready to go" to be funded under the bill, Lipinski said. If states do not spend the money they receive in six months, they must give it back to the federal government. The state does not need to provide matching funds under the stimulus bill.

"Resurfacing projects are going to be the most likely place that they (the money) will go," Lipinski said.

Lipinski tried and failed to add an amendment to the bill requiring that money from the stimulus package be spent only on American-made products, but like scores of proposed additions, it did not make the cut.

Lipinski said he voted for the bill reluctantly and was disappointed that more money was not devoted to job creation and transportation. The bill spends about \$2,800 for every person in the country, he said.

"This is not the bill that I would have written," he said.

Among other things, Lipinski said he was concerned about the bill's inclusion of an extra \$20 billion for food stamps. Some of that money could have been spent on transportation, he said.

"People are hurting, people have lost their jobs, food prices have risen, but I think it'd be better to give someone the opportunity to have a job, to create jobs, than to give them food stamps," he said.