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Funding bill puts depot proposal back on track

St. Paul hub may get $50 million.

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With $50 million of federal transportation money earmarked for rekindling St. Paul's dormant Union Depot, the lofty dream of transit and riverfront boosters suddenly has real meat to it.

The depot money is part of a $286.5 billion transportation bill for federal highways, public transit and road safety projects over the next six years.

Final negotiations on the bill, hashed out in a conference committee, were underway right up until the expected House passage today. The Senate also is expected to approve the measure as early as today before President Bush signs it into law.

The $50 million has sparked a giddy response from St. Paul-area politicians, as well as riverfront planners who have been salivating for years to turn the shuttered depot concourses into a modern transportation hub that could include light-rail and high-speed trains.

DEPOT continues on A9

DEPOT from A1

Infusion of money might push move of Post Office

St. Paul Mayor Randy Kelly called it "the most significant infusion ever of new federal dollars for rail and transit in the East Metro." He said it's among only a handful of national projects to receive such major funding.

In the complex scenario under negotiation, St. Paul and Ramsey County would buy 12 essential acres of U.S. Postal Service property along the Mississippi River. The outdated St. Paul postal headquarters would move by 2009 to an expanded Eagan facility, requiring more highway-improvement money for the additional mail trucks.

Then light-rail trains, commuter lines to Hastings and North Branch, high-speed Amtrak service to Chicago and Greyhound and Jefferson buses would eventually roll out of the old depot, prompting office and housing redevelopment nearby.

Up until now, all that has been mostly a wispy vision. Supporters say the transportation bill's $50 million for the depot is a major step toward converting that vision into reality.

"It's a huge symbolic piece, because the post office now knows we have the resources on our end to make it happen," said Ramsey County Commissioner Rafael Ortega, who chairs the Regional Rail Authority.

Bill Morin, a Port Authority dealmaker who is negotiating with the Postal Service for St. Paul and Ramsey County, has declined to comment on the talks until a deal is reached.

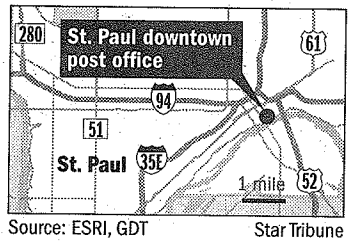
But Patrick Seeb, president of the St. Paul Riverfront Corp., looks at the billion-dollar redevelopment underway around Denver's old Union Station and says such deals all start with that first flow of cash from Congress.

"None of this happens easily or quickly, but when the federal government puts the first significant dollars on the table, it opens doors and gives the rest of the market confidence that this idea and concept will become a reality," Seeb said.

Congressional backing of the depot can help build new tracks for commuter, high-speed and light-rail lines as well as jump-starting amenities such as a new marina on the riverfront, according to Weiming Lu, head of the Lowertown Redevelopment Corp.

"This is an incredible start of a journey into a whole new frontier for the riverfront," Lu said. "And without help from Congress, these 30 acres of land would sit idle for another 30 or 40 years."

St. Paul boosters often point to the riverfront west of the arched Robert Street Bridge, where a new Science Museum of Minnesota, the Xcel Energy Center and a revamped Harriet Island have blossomed in recent years. Now, they say, that riverfront reclamation can extend east of Robert Street.



Source: ESRI, GDT Star Tribune

Eagan officials were upbeat as well, even though the federal money won't flow directly to address their highway-improvement needs. They're looking forward to more than 1,000 new postal jobs shifting from downtown St. Paul.

"Anything that moves us a step closer to likely reality, we're pleased about," Eagan spokesman Tom Garrison said. "But everybody needs to remember we have some very significant transportation needs and we're another piece of the puzzle."

Eagan is still waiting to learn how many trucks will rumble out of an expanded postal facility every day. Among other things, they want money for a new Denmark Avenue overpass at Interstate Hwy. 35E.

Ortega said those funds are not part of the new federal transportation bill, but federal dollars flow through the Minnesota Department of Transportation and a unified coalition will help push for Eagan's request, perhaps in a state bonding bill.

Historic legislation

While it is the largest public works bill in U.S. history, the transportation bill represents a significant spending decrease from previous versions that Congress had debated during the past two years.

The White House threatened to veto any bill that topped $284 billion, but President Bush is expected to sign the latest compromise between House and Senate conferees.

Members of the Minnesota House delegation also secured approximately $241 million in funds earmarked for special transportation projects in their districts. About half of that money, $121.3 million, will be funneled to 57 projects in the northern Minnesota district represented by Rep. James Oberstar, the ranking Democrat on the House Transportation Committee.

Many of the projects are for bike trails. Oberstar, who plays a prominent role in national transportation spending, lauded the bill for improving highway safety, promoting economic development and creating jobs.

"Simply put, this bill will get America moving — and working — again," he said.

Rep. Betty McCollum, D-Minn., who represents St. Paul, gave much of the credit to Oberstar for funding the depot, one of 25 projects of "national and regional significance" in the bill.

"This is a massive investment in a legacy project that will give birth to both transit and an economic transformation for St. Paul and the East Metro," McCollum said.

Overall, about 80 percent of the bill is directed toward highway projects, with 18 percent going to mass transit and the rest going for transportation safety projects.

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