



Recap of May 5, 2008 Decatur Community Briefing

More than 70 business and community leaders from the Decatur area attended the May 5th TFIC Transportation Briefing hosted by the Decatur Chamber of Commerce. Three state legislators from the area and Congressman Hare's district staff also attended the briefing and offered their comments in response to the transportation funding presentation by Linda Wheeler.

Randy Prince of the Decatur Chamber opened the meeting. Jim Schwarz of the Route 51 Coalition and a Decatur area resident then offered remarks about the need for additional state investment as we head into the 2009 federal reauthorization debate.

After Linda Wheeler's presentation about reduced state transportation investment and the challenges facing federal transportation funding, TFIC member Craig Fink of the Association of County Engineers offered comments about the need for non-earmarked funds so that local governments can receive the formula dollars that are so critical to helping them cover their rising maintenance costs.

Pat O'Brien of Congressman Phil Hare's office noted that maintenance funding is key, but that earmarks are also important. He said Illinois is currently second only to California in the number of earmarked projects that were authorized. And he opened the door to working with state policymakers to try to help them past the "tough spot" they are currently struggling through as they attempt to pass a capital bill to fund transportation.

Senate Republican Leader Frank Watson indicated that the appointment of former U.S. Speaker Hastert and President Poshard to chair the Illinois Works Coalition was a positive sign because of their political skills. He admitted that the state is "being delinquent" in response to the federal work done by the delegation in 2005 that increased Illinois' share of national transportation funding. And Watson also noted that maintenance funding, a lock box to protect revenues and reduction of Road Fund diversions are key. He reported that the Illinois Works Coalition is considering revenue sources now and they include: gaming expansion, license plate fee increases, motor vehicle registration increases, certificate of title increases and sales tax revenues resulting from increased gas prices.

Rep. Bill Mitchell said that capital funding is the most important issue, which he tied to economic health. He reported that the House Republicans have been calling for a capital proposal and that we all need to be aggressive to pass a capital bill. He asked for letters and phone calls to elected officials from those of us who want to see capital funding pass.

Rep. Bob Flider also spoke to the group, indicating that capital funding was "vitaly important," and that it will be critical to protect central Illinois' interests by limiting the administration's discretion. He pointed to the TFIC proposal for distribution of monies on an equitable basis downstate, and expressed hope that the bill would be reconsidered.