

Build the Block will pursue state, federal funds

Illinois secretary of transportation: 'We're working with you'

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PEORIA — There might yet be additional state and federal money available for the \$136 million Build the Block project, maybe enough to close the funding gap that would still exist even if voters approve the sales tax increase next week.

At least that's the hope of state Sen. David Koehler, D-Peoria. He said Monday he would try to help procure \$4 million of federal economic stimulus money for an underground parking garage and an additional \$10 million from a state capital bill to close the funding gap.

There has been no capital expenditure bill in Illinois since the Gov. George Ryan administration.

"I'm 99 percent certain we're going to get a state capital budget this year," Koehler said Monday morning. "I'd like \$10 million for the (Peoria Riverfront Museum), but how much it would get would depend on the size of the bill. That would be my hope anyway."

Koehler spoke at a news conference that included remarks from Gary Hannig, the Illinois secretary of transportation. It is his agency that will direct any economic stimulus money from the federal government and state capital expenditures to local projects.

Hannig pledged his support to the Build the Block project, which includes the museum and a Caterpillar visitors center, at the news conference inside the Peoria Labor Temple.

"This community is at a crossroads - what it is you want this community to be five, 10, 20 years down the road," Hannig said. "This plan offers a part of that vision and the state of Illinois wants to be a part of it. We're working with you."

Hannig is working with Koehler and other legislators to create state and local partnerships in which economic stimulus funds can create jobs quickly. Projects that are already planned and "shovel-ready," like the underground parking structure of the block, are given priority. The parking structure would qualify as a transportation enhancement project, Koehler said.

"Transportation is the foundation for economic development and job creation in Illinois," Hannig said in prepared remarks. "Whether the funds come from the federal package or a statewide capital program, our first priority at (IDOT) is to support communities like Peoria in rebuilding crucial transportation infrastructure and creating a sound environment for job creation to take place for years to come."

More than \$91 million has been committed to the \$136 million project - \$55 million of it from Caterpillar - that includes a company-financed Caterpillar visitors center.

On April 7, Peoria County voters will decide whether to approve a quarter-cent sales tax increase to raise \$40 million to help build the museum. The 25-cent tax on every \$100 of sales in Peoria County would cost each resident an estimated \$17 a year. Groceries, titled items like cars and boats, and some medical expenses and pharmaceuticals would be exempt.

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