

Transportation summit targets I-90 corridor

Mass-transit option pushed between O'Hare and Rockford

By Richard Wronski, Tribune reporter

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The top officials from Chicago's mass transit, transportation and planning agencies gathered Tuesday for a summit on the region's transportation needs and congestion, but the session produced little more than agreement that much work needs to be done before plans could be launched.

The summit focused special attention on the need for a strategy to develop the Interstate Highway 90/Jane Addams Tollway between O'Hare International Airport and Rockford into a multimodal corridor with a mass-transit option and an improved highway.

Already, nearly 1 million travelers a day ply the I-90 corridor, either in vehicles or on the CTA's Blue Line. Rush-hour car trips can last an hour or more, officials said.

But while state and local officials have set up an advisory council to guide development of the proposed Elgin-O'Hare Expressway extension and airport bypass, attendees at Tuesday's summit didn't propose the same for the I-90 corridor.

State Transportation Secretary Gary Hannig said participants weren't prepared to do that yet.

"Today gave us an opportunity to discuss these issues," Hannig said. "You can see that not everybody is there yet, but we're all willing to sit down and talk and find ways to make it happen."

Kristi Lafleur, executive director of the Illinois Tollway, said the summit showed a consensus for developing the corridor, and that officials would follow up with a "more structured process."

The tollway would like to rebuild its part of the 50-year-old road and get transit agencies to help pay the cost. Estimates for widening I-90 and adding congestion-relief options, such as high-occupancy vehicle tolling and express bus lanes, range from \$1.9 billion to \$4.5 billion.

Lafleur said as much as \$200 million could be saved by starting such a project by 2015. Meanwhile, the tollway has launched this year's "quick fix" asphalt resurfacing of 27 miles of the Jane Addams at a cost of \$65 million.

Tuesday's session brought together almost all the chairmen, many of the board members and the top staffers from all the region's transit agencies in the same room, along with leaders of the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning.

Planners once envisioned the proposed Metra suburb-to-suburb STAR Line running down the median of I-90, but state and federal funding for the multibillion-dollar project has dried up.

"The days of money raining down from Washington are over," said Randy Blankenhorn, executive director of the metropolitan planning agency.

A cheaper and quicker option would be to run express buses on I-90 and other parts of the tollway system, and Pace is ready to do that, said Richard Kwasneski, Pace's chairman.

"We're ready to go, but we have to figure out what the best approach is," Kwasneski said. "The financial part is the most difficult question: Who pays what and when?"

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