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October 05, 2011

## Bloomington Trail close to securing major federal funding

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For years, park advocates have dreamed of turning a dormant railroad line on Chicago's Northwest Side into an elevated park that would stretch for nearly 3 miles and include a bike trail.

Now, [that vision](#) seems closer than ever to reality.

City officials on Tuesday night said they are on the verge of securing millions of dollars in federal funding for the project, which is called the Bloomington Trail. When state and local matches are figured in, the total would top \$46 million.

"It's real money," said Janet Attarian, a project director for the Chicago Department of Transportation following a presentation of design alternatives for the project at the McCormick Tribune YMCA at 1834 N. Lawndale Avenue. "This is obviously a huge leap forward for the project."

Indeed, after years of delays, planners think that construction on the project's first phase could begin in 2013 and be completed in late 2014.

At a minimum, that phase would include a bike trail because the project would be made possible through the federal Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality Improvement program, or CMAQ, which supports efforts that lower pollution and provide relief from traffic congestion. Later phases would add other features to the project.

The federal funds would require a 20 percent state and local match for an overall total of \$46.275 million, Attarian said.

They would be used for a combination of infrastructure and site improvements on the dormant rail line, which was constructed from 1913 to 1915 and slices on an east-west path through the neighborhoods of Logan Square, Humboldt Park, Wicker Park and Bucktown. The line is raised 17 feet above street level and has 35 viaducts.

The board of the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning will vote Oct. 12 whether to grant its final approval to the project, said Luann Hamilton, a CDOT deputy commissioner. If no hitches occur at the federal level, design and engineering work could begin, she said.

On Wednesday, plans for the trail gathered further momentum as Mayor Rahm Emanuel introduced legislation to the City council that would create a ground-level entry point to the trail. Under the legislation, the city would sell roughly a third of an acre at 1799-1805 N. Milwaukee to the Chicago Park District for \$1. The district would then develop the two-parcel property as a public park.

This summer, the district opened such an entry point park at Albany and Whipple streets.

At Tuesday night's meeting, the team of designers working on the project's conceptual phase—the engineering firm Arup, Chicago architect Carol Ross Barney and representatives of New York landscape architect Michael Van Valkenburgh—discussed the history of the trail, ideas that residents expressed during two days of workshops last weekend, and alternatives for the rail line's future.

One of the designers said the project had the potential to be a "lifted landscape where you're traveling through on a magic carpet."

A key tension to resolve: The bike path must be at least 12 feet wide, leaving only 18 feet of width for other uses. Some residents expressed concern about conflicts between bicyclists and

pedestrians, like those that regularly plague the lakefront bike trail. But the weekend sessions produced consensus that the trail would prioritize the pedestrian's experience over the speed of the cyclist, the designers said.

The bike trail could be straight or curved, and it could split into paths for bikers and pedestrians. It could dip beneath the railroad line's current level or rise higher. Dipping would make it easier for people to climb up to the trail from access points. Making the trail higher would create views of the trail's surroundings, which include home and factories. Art would signal entrances to the trail.

Security and the trail's hours are another issue. While the park is supposed to provide a respite from the city, it's also supposed to be as safe as a typical Chicago park. People who live along the trail don't want lights shining in their windows at night. Nor do they want to be kept awake by noise coming from the trail.

Hamilton said that inspections of the rail line's viaducts have revealed almost all of them to be structurally sound. One or two might need to be replaced, she said. but the absence of the need for major structural work would remove a major hurdle of cost and time to the project.

The line is owned by the Canadian Pacific railroad.

The presence of a bike trail would make the Bloomingdale Trail different from New York's High Line, a linear park built on an old elevated line in Lower Manhattan, or an elevated park in Paris that predates the New York project.