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NEWS ::

Downtown Skokie station breaks ground

June 21, 2010

By **MIKE ISAACS** misaacs@pioneerlocal.com

The high-pitched sound of an old-fashioned train whistle marked the sound of progress Monday for a new downtown Skokie Swift station that has been in the planning stages for 10 years.

The groundbreaking ceremony held at the Illinois Science + Technology Park ended outside the facility with U.S. Rep. Jan Schakowsky, D-9th, pulling on a cord that released a whistle so loud that some people covered their ears. But considering what that train whistle signified, the sound played like sweet music to those in attendance.

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From left, Skokie Mayor George Van Dusen, RTA Board Member William Coulson and U.S. Rep. Jan Schakowsky, D-9th laugh after pulling a whistle at the groundbreaking event for the CTA Yellow Line Oakton Street Station at the Illinois Science + Technology Park Monday.

(Allison Williams/Staff Photographer)

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A view of the train tracks where the new CTA Yellow Line Oakton Street Station will be near the corner of Searle Parkway and Skokie Boulevard. Officials honored the start of the construction of the Downtown Skokie Yellow Line station with a groundbreaking ceremony at the Illinois Science + Technology Park.

(Allison Williams/Staff Photographer)

"We've been waiting for this for 10 years to be exact," said Skokie Mayor George Van Dusen. "We thank you for your presence here today, but also for your patience and perseverance as well as for your participation in the process of making this dream a reality."

Those who attended the event were also given wooden train whistles where they could make their own noise at appropriate times -- whooping it up for a train station expected to take thousands of people to and from downtown Skokie each month.

The downtown Skokie Swift station has been planned for so long that some public officials like Van Dusen were thoroughly relieved the day had finally arrived. The project now begins the long-awaited construction phase and is scheduled to be completed by the fall of next year.

One of three major projects in the downtown area, the station joins the development of the Illinois Science Park and the village's continuing efforts to make over Oakton Street and Lincoln Avenue to create a new and thriving downtown.

Officials have realized for a long time that their only chance to remake downtown was to create a train stop there since plans call for more people to come to the area than ever before. Illinois Science + Technology Park officials have also said that the transit stop was needed to attract future development.

"I come here very humbly because there are so many people for whom this has been years and years of work," Schakowsky said. "It's been years of work and planning and dreaming and envisioning. Now we can finally see what this station is going to be like."

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Schakowsky said she played a small role in making sure federal funding was delivered in a timely manner, but there really were no small roles for this day to happen. So many people and agencies needed to work together, officials repeatedly noted, that for them Monday's ceremony became a testament to the collaborative process.

Planners had to bring together the Illinois Department of Transportation, the CTA, the village of Skokie, and Commonwealth Edison to move the project forward.

"You can imagine (the difficulty of) getting all of those agencies in the same boat rowing in the same direction," Van Dusen said.

"I'm very impressed just to hear the list of so many people who contributed to a project that's been 10 years in the making," said Mike Murray, advisor to Gov. Pat Quinn on transportation. "It certainly took a lot of heavy lifting from a lot of people over a long period of time."

Murray said the project will have a positive impact on jobs -- initially construction jobs but down the line on other jobs when the station helps spur economic development.

"It will bring long-term sustainable jobs to Skokie," he said. "We've seen transportation projects like this throughout the state where folks work together to bring a new transportation infrastructure to their community, and economic development benefits."

The downtown "Kiss 'n Ride" station, to be located just north of Oakton Street and Skokie Boulevard, will host about 1,200 boardings each day, according to estimates by the Chicago Transit Authority. The station is expected to cost about \$20 million -- \$14 million to be paid from federal funds and \$6 million from the village's tax increment finance fund.

The Skokie Swift station on Dempster Street with non-stop rides between Dempster and Howard Street began in 1964, but the history of the line dates back almost three-quarters of a century. The line began as a joint project between the Chicago Rapid Transit, then operator of Chicago's el train system, and the North Shore and Milwaukee Railroad. Years later it became the Yellow Line.

CTA President Richard Rodriguez called Monday's ceremony as important as any in the train line's long history.

"A state of the art station will provide greater access to the businesses at the Illinois Science + Technology Park and will serve as an additional inducement for other businesses to build in the park and the burgeoning downtown business district," he said.

The downtown CTA station will also have benefits for areas well beyond Skokie, according to officials. That's why representatives of Niles Township and Lincolnwood Mayor Jerry Turry were on hand Monday as were State Reps. Lou Lang, D-16th, and Elizabeth Coulson, R-17th.

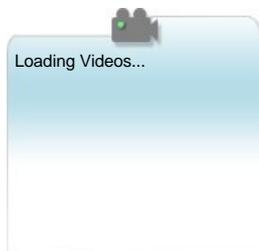
William Coulson, a member of the RTA Board of Directors, said the project was so "well vetted" that it went through faster than it might have otherwise -- despite the long 10 years in the making.

"Obviously, this is a lot more complicated than just building two wooden train platforms," William Coulson said. "It's the whole infrastructure and it's the study to see if this is a good use of public money."

The RTA was involved in many of the key components for the station including the shelter, the bus stop, the taxi stands and the pedestrian access surrounding the station.

"This project is going to be very successful," William Coulson predicted. "It's going to be a model for the country, and it's a tribute to Skokie you were able to do it in tough economic times."

Van Dusen also said that public transportation projects of this kind are a major help to the environment. He noted that the United States uses 20 percent of the world's oil, even though it constitutes only 2 percent of the Earth's population.



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