



Legislators give go-ahead to new Elgin-O'Hare toll road

Benefits also cut for transit board members



(Tribune illustration)

By Richard Wronski, Chicago Tribune reporter

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Amid the divisiveness this spring over pension reform and casino gambling, legislators managed to agree overwhelmingly on at least one thing: The Chicago area needs a new toll road.

With little more than a dozen "no" votes — mostly from Downstate representatives but a few from the Chicago area — the General Assembly gave the green light to the region's newest and most expensive tollway.

Although the Illinois State Toll Highway Authority has been planning the \$3.4 billion project for several years and received federal approval, the project needed legislative consent.

A joint resolution authorized the tollway to convert the existing Elgin-O'Hare Expressway into a toll road and construct a western bypass around O'Hare International Airport.

The resolution was the most wide-ranging transportation legislation approved this session.

Transit users also had a stake in several other bills, including whether part-time, politically appointed transit agency board members should get taxpayer-funded health care and retirement benefits, and whether to abolish the Regional Transportation Authority.

Here's a look at the measures:

Elgin-O'Hare

Both chambers passed a resolution that expands the tollway system with a new highway

skirting O'Hare and lengthening the existing Elgin-O'Hare Expressway.

The Illinois Department of Transportation built the Elgin-O'Hare in 1993 but never extended it to either Elgin or the airport.

The new resolution gives the ISTHA the bonding and construction power to finish the job.

The new toll road along the western edge of O'Hare will link the Jane Addams Memorial Tollway (I-90) and the Tri-State Tollway (I-294).

The bypass will connect with a widened and extended Elgin-O'Hare, running east along Thorndale Avenue.

The resolution refers to the project as the "Elgin-O'Hare Western Access," but there are no foreseeable plans to construct a western terminal at O'Hare. The tollway will build a \$30 million ramp to O'Hare property, but there's nothing to access there.

The resolution passed by a 96-14 vote in the House and a 50-0 vote in the Senate. The measure doesn't require Gov. Pat Quinn's approval, but he is a strong supporter of the project.

A sponsor, Sen. Tom Cullerton, D-Villa Park, said the project will reduce chronic traffic congestion and bring economic growth to the western suburbs.

"With all the vacant small businesses in the western suburbs, this opens up warehouses for freight capacity, allows manufacturers to get their goods to market faster and will help these small businesses grow," Cullerton said.

A handful of Chicago-area state representatives voted against the measure.

One of the "no" votes, Rep. Carol Sente, D-Vernon Hills, said she was concerned about the new toll road's cost.

The project has a \$300 million funding gap. Proponents hope to raise money from local funds, possibly by creating a special taxing district, and from a federal grant.

"I won't support it until I hear where the funding source is," Sente said. "If there is a funding source that's not a tax or toll increase, that might change the picture."

Two other legislators said they opposed the measure because of the higher tolls imposed last year to pay for the project.

"I can't support another fee on working people who are struggling every day," said Rep. Stephanie Kifowit, D-Aurora. "My vote is against all these increased tolls."

Said Rep. Natalie Manley, D-Joliet: "I feel it's unacceptable to have residents pay more while watching their property taxes and gas taxes increase."

Transit board benefits

Both chambers approved a bill that eliminates health care insurance and pensions for future board members of the RTA, the CTA, Metra and Pace.

But current board members will get to keep the benefits.

Sponsor Rep. Jack Franks, D-Marengo, called the benefits "sweetheart deals" for board members, who are appointed by officials of the six counties and the mayor of Chicago.

"Officials should serve Illinois because they truly care about making a difference, not because they are interested in a lucrative benefits package," Franks said.

The legislation originally called for ending the transit board members' salaries as well, but this provision was removed during negotiations.

The bill, which passed 106-0 in the House and 54-0 in the Senate, was sent to Quinn.

A spokesman said the governor has not taken a position on the bill, but is "generally supportive of it and the savings it achieves for the taxpayer."

Metra fare hikes

Legislation that would have required transportation committees in both chambers to hold public hearings regarding any Metra fare increases was approved by the full House but never advanced beyond committee in the Senate.

The bill, introduced by Rep. Al Riley, D-Olympia Fields, originally called for hearings on fare hikes sought by the CTA and Pace as well, but that provision was eliminated after those

agencies objected.

RTA/CMAP merger

Legislation to merge the staffs and operations of the RTA and the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning failed to advance out of committee in the Senate.

The bill was introduced in response to critics who contend the RTA has failed to perform as intended by the legislature.

Sponsor Sen. Terry Link, D-Waukegan, said the bill's goal was to double the use of public transit by 2040 and eliminate waste and duplicate efforts by the two agencies.

The bill faced several hurdles, however, including concerns over the political makeup of the merged agency's board and the number of votes needed to take action.

The civic group Metropolis Strategies began a campaign last year to end the RTA and combine the agencies. The group also calls for a revision of the formula used by the state to fund mass transit.

Frank Beal, Metropolis Strategies' executive director, said the group will continue working to resolve concerns.

"The Chicago region is losing ground and needs to improve the quality and quantity of its transit services regionwide," Beal said. "The governing structure of mass transit, and the unwise and outdated funding scheme, need to be rethought and replaced."