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Why you should vote 'no' on the Safe Roads Amendment

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Is building a highway more important than sheltering a homeless person, treating someone who needs medical help or hiring a public school teacher?

Should your town or village be able to raise taxes for needed programs in the way residents want without Springfield special interests sticking their nose into it?

Are automobiles more valuable in creating jobs than public transit, carpooling, bike lanes and other modes of commuting?



Photo by Bloomberg

Advanced Asphalt workers pave a state highway in Streator. On Nov. 8, Illinois voters will be asked whether they support an amendment to the state constitution that would block lawmakers from using transportation funds for anything other than their stated purpose.

They don't ask those questions in the **big-bucks TV ads** that Citizens to Protect Transportation is running this campaign season. Instead, the spots suggest that taxes you wanted to go to new and improved roads instead are being "raid(ed)" by lawmakers "for their pet projects," and that the only way to prevent crumbling roads and bridges from collapsing is to put all of the money into a lockbox by voting for the Safe Roads Amendment that's on the Nov. 8 ballot.

Take a good look under the hood before buying this car, folks. Some powerful insiders who want to fatten their pocketbooks are the ones behind this campaign, and much of the dough they're using to make their point comes from **unidentified "dark money" sources**.

Here's the story.

Illinois imposes a variety of taxes and fees on autos, driver's licenses, motor fuel, etc. So do many cities, such as Chicago, which makes residents buy vehicle stickers. Proceeds are generally supposed to pay for the upkeep of roads and, occasionally, public transit and other modes of transportation. And, for the most part, that is where the money goes.

But on occasion, like amid Illinois' budget crisis, the money gets directed to other needs such as social services and schools. How much is in question. Citizens to Protect Transportation sets the figure at \$6.8 billion since fiscal 2002. The Civic Federation **did its own analysis** and came up with \$519 million for that period once "road fund" expenditures for things such as state police salaries and pensions were excluded.

The state clearly has unmet needs for infrastructure work, as I've reported numerous times. And construction groups want every penny they can get. So the International Union of Operating Engineers, Illinois Road Builders and Illinois Asphalt Pavement Association (convicted insider Bill Cellini's old group) talked lawmakers into putting a binding referendum on the proposed amendment on the ballot. Then they contributed millions of dollars toward its passage.

The biggest chunk, \$1 million, comes from something called the Fight Back Fund. It's one of those groups that doesn't disclose its donors, but it's affiliated with the operating engineers.

The union's Marc Poulos, who heads the Fight Back Fund, says the amendment merely would require that money raised for transportation go toward transportation. Some groups like the Metropolitan Planning Council agree.

But according to Chicago Budget Director Alex Holt, the city might lose discretion over at least \$250 million a year in local taxes—not counting the \$49 million it gets annually in state gas taxes. (Poulos confirms that's the case.) That money gets used for many things, including libraries, she says. At the same time, it's not certain that expenditures for snow removal, streetlights and other items would be eligible under **the proposed amendment**.

"The language just isn't clear," Holt says.

The folks at the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning raise other concerns. Though Wisconsin and other states have adopted "lockbox" amendments in recent years, the Illinois version fails to specify planning as a qualified cost, gives little attention to increasingly important intermodal transportation and makes roadwork a higher priority over transit work, according to the agency. It's also unclear how passage would affect state capital bond issues that depend on various revenue streams.

A few decades ago, with good intentions, Illinois added a restrictive spending section to its constitution. It's known as the pension clause, and, largely thanks to it, paying workers excessive retirement benefits now is a higher priority than schools, health care, law enforcement and other needs.

The Safe Roads Amendment is the pension clause on steroids. Vote "no."

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