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Opponents emerge against Illinois road fund ballot question

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Chicago Tribune | TNS file

A view from Bluff Road over Interstate 55. A proposed amendment on the November election ballot proposes funds from tolls, registration fees and motor fuel taxes, among other sources, be locked into going toward transportation-related projects, such as road construction.

CHICAGO (AP) — The first question on Illinois' ballots in the next month's election isn't for president or senator, but a constitutional amendment aimed at preventing transportation-related funding from being spent on other purposes.

Despite widespread bipartisan support, some opponents have begun to surface, including social service groups that think it's unfair to protect transportation over other issues.

The proposal — the sole constitutional amendment on the ballot — seeks to protect money generated through transportation-related sources such as tolls.

Here's a closer look at the proposal:

The question

Over the years, transportation-related money — consisting of tolls, registration fees and motor fuel taxes, to name a few — has been used by state government for unrelated spending. A coalition of business groups and unions argue it's so widespread that the safety of Illinois roads, bridges and railways is threatened.

The "lockbox" amendment, backed by lawmakers, proposes the funds be used solely for transportation-related purposes, such as construction or paying debt related to transit projects.

Transportation funds are an easy target for lawmakers looking to patch budget holes. Backers claim that since 2003, more than \$6 billion set aside for transportation has been used elsewhere.

Transportation experts have long noted the state's deteriorating system of bridges, roads and railways. The Chicago-based Metropolitan Planning Council projects it would take more than \$40 billion in spending over the next decade to fix them.

Opponents

Groups pushing for better social services funding, including the Heartland Alliance and Sargent Shriver National Center on Poverty Law, have objected to the measure. The Civic Federation, a tax policy and government research organization, also questions supporters' math.

The opponents signed a letter last week saying Illinois residents should demand a balanced budget as "a much more equitable and sustainable solution than irrevocably committing the State of Illinois to one exclusive spending priority."

The Chicago-based Civic Federation says amendment supporters used broad criteria to estimate how much has been taken from transportation-related funds in calculating their over \$6 billion figure, for example, including state police salaries. The Civic Federation's calculation of three transportation-related funds over the same period shows it's closer to about \$520 million.

The Chicago Tribune's editorial board blasted the proposal as a way to protect union jobs.

The Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, which hasn't taken a position, questioned whether the amendment is specific enough to include spending for planning and areas of transportation besides roadways.

Proponents

The proposal sailed through the Illinois House and Senate with wide bipartisan support, a scarce occurrence as the budget fight between Republican Gov. Bruce Rauner and the Democratic-controlled Legislature has overshadowed other issues in Springfield.

Along with unions, it has backing of the Illinois Chamber of Commerce, which argues that it would help boost the economy and rebuild taxpayer trust.

Newspaper editorial boards, including at The (Kankakee) Daily Journal, have urged a "yes" vote, saying state funds should be used for their intended purpose.

Marc Poulos a director of Operating Engineers Local 150, which backs the measure, says supporters want to boost the state's infrastructure by prioritizing road and bridge work. He says it is written to include numerous transportation issues and dismissed the notion that the amendment was proposed to protect union jobs.

"It's necessary for safety," he said. "That is the No. 1 issue."

The odds

One of Illinois' neighboring states, Wisconsin, approved a similar constitutional amendment in the 2014 election.

Illinois has two routes for a constitutional amendment to succeed. It can get affirmative votes either from at least 60 percent of the people voting on the amendment itself or by a majority of everyone voting in the election overall.

Backers have said their biggest challenge is educating voters, who may be tempted to skip over the question.