

# Aurora ready for bids for Transportation Center project

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Steve Lord

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The city of Aurora should get bids for the roughly \$15 million Aurora Transportation Center enhancement project by the end of the month.

The City Council this week approved the final document needed before the city could bid the project. Aldermen voted 11-1 to approve a local agency agreement with the Illinois Department of Transportation.

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The project includes a number of improvements and changes to the Transportation Center on North Broadway, as well as some expansion and improvements to RiverEdge Park across the street. It also includes a pedestrian bridge over the Fox River.

"This takes the Transportation Center and makes it friendlier," said Ald. Rick Mervine, 8th.

Mervine, along with Ald. Tina Bohman, 1st, and Ald. Michael Saville, 6th, made a point this week to say constituents in their wards support the project. Bohman pointed out that it fixes things there that were done "piecemeal" through the years and puts them into an overall plan.

Saville said his constituents in particular "have been advocating for this bridge for quite some time." Saville represents the 6th Ward that has the west bank of the Fox River as a border. It makes his ward accessible by foot or bicycle to the Transportation Center, he said.

They were answering Ald. Judd Lofchie, 10th, the sole vote against the project, who said people in his far East Side ward are against the project.

"I ran on a fiscally conservative platform," he said. "This is not a simple project. If we come over budget on this, the city has to pay."

Over the months the city has been considering the paperwork tied to the project, several residents have referred to the pedestrian bridge as a "luxury" and have said they are concerned it would increase the amount of property taxes they pay to the city.

But in fact there is very little city money in the project, and none of it is coming directly from the tax levy. Most of the project, more than \$12 million of it, is coming from Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality funds, which are doled out by the federal government and administered in this area by the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning.

Another roughly \$2 million is coming in the form of a grant from the Kane County Forest Preserve District.

The city's portion is \$4.6 million and is being paid from the proceeds of a \$5 million general obligation bond the city passed last year. Those bonds are paid out of the bond and interest levy that the city extends every year. That has not changed in years, always at \$4 million.

The city tax levy is increasing this year, but not because of the Transportation Center project.

Supporters of the project pointed out that it is because of the pedestrian bridge that the city received the grant money. The pedestrian bridge makes city parking lots on the west side of downtown accessible to the Transportation Center. That means commuters can use the west-side parking lots to get to the center and catch the train.

That's one reason the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning ranked the project so highly and why it became eligible for Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality funds. The Forest Preserve District awarded its grant to the city because the pedestrian bridge connects the bike trails on both sides of the river.

Charlie Zine, a member of the Aurora Riverwalk Commission, said it "makes tremendous financial sense" to leverage the bridge to get the millions from the federal government. He pointed out Illinois is a donor state, meaning it sends more money to the federal government in taxes than it gets back.

Supporters also pointed out that the work at the Transportation Center, including the bridge, was first put forth in 2005 as part of the Seize the Future plan.

"This is not a rash decision," Zine said.

Stephane Phifer, of the city's planning department, said an estimated 1,000 acres of land, commercial and residential, are within a zone that will see property values increase because they are near RiverEdge Park. Also, land increases in value when it's within walking distance of transit facilities, she said.

Ald. Carl Franco, 5th, said the project is the "right thing to do" and "makes great fiscal sense."

Phifer said bids are due for the project by the end of the month and the city is hoping to start construction in the spring. Right now, officials are looking for a grand opening in 2020.

*slord@tribpub.com*