

Federal cash will help unclog bottle neck at train tunnel

The Associated Press
BELLOWS FALLS, Vt.

A choke point on the state's rail lines caused by a historic train tunnel in the center of Bellows Falls should be relieved with money in the latest federal transportation spending plan.

The tunnel is slated to get \$2 million and work could get under way as early as this fall, said Charles Miller, the railway operations manager for the Vermont Transportation Agency.

"I think that we've got to organize our folks and finalize the plan for what we expect to get done and get on it right this fall," Miller said.

The \$2 million was part of a \$286 billion federal package that passed the U.S. House and Senate last week.

Vermont will get \$175 million per year through 2009 in transportation funds, an increase from the recent allocation of \$125 million. That's a jump of 40 percent for the state.

Sen. Jim Jeffords, I-Vt., was one of the principal architects of the funding plan, which he would "create jobs, increase productivity on rail lines and unclog roads."

Railroads are one of the areas where Vermont has not kept pace with other states.

The trend now is toward bigger, heavier and faster trains, Miller said. The Bellows Falls tunnel, a 400-foot stone-arch tunnel built in 1851, cannot accommodate modern freight trains, and is seen as a stumbling block for the entire state.

"I'm all for increased rail activity," said Shane O'Keefe, municipal manager for Rockingham and Bellows Falls, adding that heightened rail use could help ease truck traffic.

Current plans call for lowering the tunnel's track so bigger trains can fit through it, Miller said. That can be done without changing the way the historic tunnel looks.

"It doesn't alter the tunnel ... especially at the entrance at either end," he said. "The tunnel is a significant historic structure and we wouldn't do anything to impact that."

Another \$2.5 million is slated to upgrade the capacity of a rail line between Bellows Falls and Rutland, Miller said. In turn, the system will be able to handle bigger, heavier trains, which will be able to go faster, increasing productivity, he said.

"We have not made that kind of investment in that railroad for a very, very long time," Miller said.