

Pioneer Press

LRT here is no mere 'earmark'

The St. Paul-to-Minneapolis light-rail project known as the Central Corridor has been dreamed of, planned for, sidetracked and restarted many times over, and under political leaders of varying persuasions. It has moved forward based on its merits and wide-ranging community support, and is now at the point where contracts are being let and earth is being moved.

We cannot see the future. But we believe the latest political changes in Washington and St. Paul will not, and should not, derail or slow down this vital link in our regional transportation network.

A rail link between the twin downtowns has long been on the drawing board, but fell behind the Minneapolis-to-the-airport Hiawatha light-rail line (opened in 2004) and the Northstar Corridor commuter rail line from downtown Minneapolis to the northwest suburbs (opened a year ago.)

Next up is the Central Corridor link that will put downtown St. Paul, the state Capitol, the University Avenue residential and commercial district, the University of Minnesota and downtown Minneapolis on a single rail line. Under Republican Gov. Tim Pawlenty, the Metropolitan Council, which will build and operate the line, has moved ahead to the point where preliminary utility and construction work is under way in downtown St. Paul and near the Capitol and the university.

Central Corridor is a \$957 million taxpayer-funded project. Half of the funding is to come from federal coffers and another 30 percent is coming from the Counties Transit Improvement Board, funded by a one-quarter-cent sales tax collected in five metro counties. Ten percent is coming from the state, 7 percent from Ramsey County and 3 percent from Hennepin County. The line is to open in 2014.

While the project is highly ranked by the Federal Transit Administration, it has not yet received final word that federal funding is approved. Steve Dornfeld, director of public affairs for Met Council, said that decision was delayed by a protracted dispute between the Met Council and the University of Minnesota, which has since been resolved. He said final approval is hoped for in the first quarter of 2011.

In January, there will be a new Republican majority running the U.S. House, working with a Democratic president and a smaller Democratic majority in the U.S. Senate. Veteran Rep. James Oberstar, D-Chisholm, unseated on Nov. 2., will no longer be influencing transportation funding. A new emphasis on the deficit and federal spending could trim back many programs, including rail transit.

In Minnesota, state and local funding for the Central Corridor project has already been committed. And the election results here are mixed. While there are Republican majorities in the state House and Senate that may be less transit-friendly, Democrat Mark Dayton, a Central Corridor supporter, leads the governor's race pending a recount that will begin later this month.

The Central Corridor project has moved well beyond "shovel-ready" this summer. Using state and local funds, with letters committing the feds to pay half if and when the funding agreement is approved, the Met Council has authorized \$100 million or so in immediate work. As far as we can tell, the federal government has never allowed such work to proceed without eventually coming up with its share. In addition to the current work, the Met Council has awarded nearly \$600 million in contracts, covering the majority of work on the line over the life of the project.

But change is surely in the air. U.S. Rep. Betty McCollum, D-St. Paul, told Minnesota Public Radio on Tuesday she is concerned that a \$45 million Central Corridor appropriation will get caught up in the battle over congressional earmarks. That is a first installment on future federal funding, Dornfeld said.

The term "earmark" has come to refer to projects that members of Congress write into spending bills without proving their worthiness. The Central Corridor project has gone through years of vetting in the competition for federal dollars and has risen to the top of the national "new starts" list in the federal bureaucracy.

Central Corridor has gotten this far because the federal government has encouraged and helped pay for transit projects aimed at reducing urban congestion. Assuming the program continues, there can be no reason to deny Central Corridor's demonstrated worthiness. It has arrived at the holes-in-the-ground stage on its merits, it should survive on the same basis.