

CAPITAL BILL: \$30 billion needed, coalition says

A Joliet audience hears options for funding state infrastructure and creating jobs

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JOLIET -- Everyone agrees something must be done to improve the state's infrastructure. The Illinois Works Coalition says funds for road construction, bridges and schools are desperately needed.

How to pay for these projects was the topic of discussion at a Tuesday night meeting that was part of a statewide listening tour being conducted by the coalition. Former U.S. House Speaker Dennis Hastert and Southern Illinois University President Glenn Poshard are chairing the coalition.

"Only 82 cents of every \$1 sent to the federal government comes back to Illinois," Hastert said. "We need to do something to get more of our own dollars back."

Members of the group are seeking a consensus for a capital program that would pay for improvements and create an estimated 700,000 jobs statewide. The goal of the group is to get a capital bill passed in Springfield. The plan started at \$25 billion, but the amount has since increased to \$30 billion.

One idea is to lease the lottery. Officials say privatization of major state assets looks more feasible in the wake of Chicago's lease of the Skyway.

State Rep. Renee Kosel, R-NewLenox; State Rep. Brent Hassert, R-Romeoville; Will County Center of Economic Development representatives; and Will County officials attended the meeting.

"This is important now before we lose another construction season," Hastert said. "Every time we lose a construction season, a year goes by and (costs) go up. Other states spend their money faster than we do."

Lawmakers from both parties have to cross party lines and do whatever it takes to get funding, he said.

"We know the needs and have to figure out ways to fund the plan," Hastert said. "No one wants to see taxes go up."

Another solution could be hiking gambling revenues by increasing the number of casinos or the number of gaming spots.

Clayton Harris, chief of staff for the Illinois Department of Transportation, said something needs to be done soon.

"We are not promising anyone anything here," Harris said. "The process has started but is not finished yet."

Jim Roolf, spokesman for the Will County Center for Economic Development, said Will County is ranked 54th on the list of fastest growing counties in the country.

"The population of Will County doubled from 1990 to 2006 and is expected to double again over the next 20 years to over 1 million people," he said.

The population boom means it's crucial to improve waterways, airports and roads to keep the jobs coming to Will County, he said.

"We need to have all facets of transportation in place whether or not all the workers live in Will County," Roolf said. "I have always said \$10 (billion) for Will would be OK."

Roolf estimated close to 150 people attended the event.

"I am very impressed," Roolf said.

For more information or to join the coalition, visit www.illinoisworkscoalition.com.