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Capital plan includes community priorities, lawmakers say

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Springfield-area state lawmakers say the \$29 billion capital construction plan they approved this spring illustrates their top spending priorities brought to them by their communities.

"It's important to have communication with the local mayors. That's where a lot of these projects came from," said Rep. Rich Brauer, R-Petersburg.

Brauer said local leaders brought him ideas to extend MacArthur Boulevard FARTHER south of Springfield and to build a new Public Safety Building at the University of Illinois at Springfield campus. The Sangamon County Board suggested the street extension, while a UIS official pushed for the building funding, he said.

Brauer said his office takes in requests for projects, he reviews and prioritizes them and then submits them to legislative leaders for consideration. He said he doesn't know how the leaders decided which projects made the actual construction program they approved.

Brauer said he doesn't take political benefit or favors into consideration in choosing projects, but also wouldn't detail how he picks his top priorities.

"I hate to name them because people will come back to me and ask why I push this one over that one," he said.

Rep. Raymond Poe, R-Springfield, said his office keeps a running list of local project requests.

"People say we might need this or that, we put them on it. Then if some money becomes available, we do what we can," he said.

Poe said leaders on Springfield's east side came to him to seek \$150,000 to help restore Central Lodge No. 3 of the Free and Accepted Masons of Springfield, 1310 E. Adams St.

Ken Page, former Springfield branch president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and a member of Lodge No. 3, said the building has historical significance.

"The building is the original Negro firehouse," he said. "It was in place during the race riots (of 1908) and everything. It's a historical building, that's why we would like it to be saved. It's not about our lodge. We could be located anywhere."

The Masons took over the building in the early 1970s. Page said the group went to both Sen. Larry Bomke and Poe, seeking to be included in the capital bill.

"We want to use the building to do some community work and have neighborhood senior citizens outreach and the potential for health and education outreach," he said.

Poe noted that while a lot of money is being handed out for projects in Springfield — provided Gov. Pat Quinn ultimately signs the capital construction bill — it's being spread out in smaller amounts to a variety of needs.

"You hope it's a project you can help them get started and they might be able to match it or come up with more money and go ahead and do something," Poe said.

Bomke, a Springfield Republican, said local leaders suggested different projects to him, such as money to restore the Masons' lodge and for a new YMCA building.

Bomke said the projects submitted to him would have cost about \$26 million, but he could ask for only about \$4 million. For instance, he said that while the cost for a new Y building is about \$15 million, the state can contribute only \$200,000. Springfield's Child Advocacy Center also asked for funds, he said, and he couldn't get a portion of \$40 million needed to prepare Iron Bridge Road to receive the traffic from the South MacArthur extension project.

"What I tried to do was be as fair as I could and spread it out equally among the communities," said Bomke. "There's no real scientific way that I made that determination."

Politics, he said, was "absolutely not" a factor in determining what projects he ultimately submitted.

"I can point to Republican and Democrat mayors who got projects," he said.

Bomke also denied that any of his projects were pork. The Masonic lodge has historic significance, he said, and the new YMCA building is a "worthwhile project that will help a lot of people in the community."

The capital bill also calls for Routt Catholic High School in Jacksonville to receive \$200,000 for roof repairs.

Enrollment at the co-educational Catholic high school in the just-completed school year was 132 students, and tuition for the 2008-09 school year was \$3,700 plus \$200 in fees, according to its Web site.

Diane Seufert, director of development, said the roof on the 43-year-old building is in bad shape.

"We have buckets sitting around in portions of the school," she said. "Janitors are replacing tiles as they get wet. This is a relief to hear we could be getting this money."

Seufert said \$200,000 would cover roughly two-thirds of the project cost.

She said she wasn't involved in helping get the money into the capital bill, but noted that Sen. Deanna Demuzio, D-Carlinville, toured the facility a few weeks ago. Rep. James Watson, R-Jacksonville, is an alumni of the school, and "that may have helped a bit," she acknowledged.

Watson, however, said he was not responsible for the money being included in the capital bill and wouldn't comment on it. Demuzio wasn't available for comment Friday.

Here's what's in the bill for some other local entities:

University of Illinois at Springfield

The school would be able to build a new 10,000-square-foot public safety building on the west side of campus with \$4 million included in the proposed capital bill.

"Essentially we've outgrown an old farmhouse, which is where our current police department is located," said Cheryl Peck, UIS spokeswoman.

The campus has grown since it opened in the 1970s, largely as a commuter college. Now, the police department includes 15 officers and a chief.

The current building doesn't have storage space required by the Commission on the Accreditation of Law Enforcement Agencies, or enough space for an interrogation room or to handle bio-hazardous materials, Peck said.

"There is no other structure that we could convert that would adequately provide what we need," Peck said.

She said the university has primarily been working with Brauer to get funding.

"We're grateful to our local legislative delegation for their help, their recognition for the need for this building," she said.

Prairie Capital Convention Center

The PCCC would receive \$4.2 million for improvements to the downtown facility.

Brian Oaks, general manager of the convention center, said the center has been working to get money from a state capital construction bill for several years.

The Springfield facility is part of a coalition of civic centers represented by a group lobbyist that are slated to receive a combined \$25 million.

Oaks called the money a "small first step" toward expansion and renovation of the convention center.

"But it's a big step for us," he added. "It allows us to address some of the operational needs we have that are part of our bigger goal of expansion."

In December, a Chicago consulting firm said Springfield's convention center needs to be expanded in order to compete for convention and meeting business with communities such as Peoria and Bloomington.

Under the \$66.4 million expansion plans, the center would grow to more than 2 1/2 times its current size and include a new exhibit hall south of the current building. The plan also includes between \$8 million and \$10 million in renovations and upgrades to the building.

Springfield YMCA

The local Y is slated to get \$200,000 to help construct a new building and parking lot.

The organization is planning to open a new \$13 million facility on the southwest side of Springfield. It is planned for 40 acres on the southwest corner of Iles Avenue and Archer Elevator Road.

Officials from the YMCA could not be reached for comment late last week.

The Springfield YMCA has about 6,000 members, and Don Darnell, the executive director, said previously that a market study predicted a new branch could generate 3,000 more membership units, or roughly 4,500 new individual members.

Drainage improvements

Area municipalities also are slated to receive money for water and drainage improvement projects. Chatham is to receive \$214,000 to build a water main. Divernon and Elkhart are also on the list to get \$214,000 apiece for water main improvements.

Sherman is slated to receive \$214,000 for drainage improvements.

A recent study found it will cost \$750,000 to fix drainage problems that have resulted from Sherman's growth and development.

Sherman Village President Trevor Clatfelter said he's been working with Bomke's office to get money included in the capital bill.

Any money approved for the project through the state would help pay for costs that can't be paid for with tax increment finance funds.

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