

## High-speed rail action coming soon, transportation secretary says

COLLINSVILLE -- U.S. Secretary of Transportation Ray LaHood says high-speed rail development is a train that will not be stopped.

LaHood was among those who met Friday afternoon with host U.S. Rep. Jerry Costello, D-Belleville, and the Leadership Council Southwest Illinois at a transportation roundtable at the Doubletree Hotel in Collinsville. LaHood said initial proposals for a new high-speed rail system in Illinois and elsewhere throughout the country are due to the Department of Transportation by Monday.

"We believe, those of us that believe in high-speed rail, believe that can happen based on the discussions we've had with 13 regions around the country that will be submitting proposals," LaHood said to reporters after the closed-door meeting. "People want high-speed rail. People that have gone to Japan, China, Europe and have ridden on high-speed rail come back and say, 'How come we don't have it?' People are ready for high-speed rail in America, and it's coming."

Illinois Secretary of Transportation Gary Hannig was also at the forum and said his department filed some of its applications for high-speed rail Friday and will file the others by Monday. Additional applications will be submitted Oct. 2.

"We plan to meet all of those deadlines," Hannig said. "Our top priority in Illinois is Chicago to St. Louis. We're going to work very hard on that."

Costello said that the metro-east business community has responded strongly to queries about high-speed rail development. He also said preparations to build a new Mississippi River bridge are progressing.

"It's a major, major project and a major priority for the business community and for the people of this region," Costello said. "When we looked at transportation priorities in the last

highway bill, we asked both people in Missouri and Illinois, and they said it was their No. 1 priority. We're pleased that it's moving forward."

Hannig said the cooperative venture between Illinois and Missouri leaders will lead to a planned bid-letting by Missouri leaders in October.

"And at that time, I think we will have a better idea of where we stand," he said. "But clearly, we are working with Missouri. Secretary LaHood has been very helpful to us as we try to work through this very complicated process of building a major bridge across the Mississippi River. We're going to still have challenges, but we're confident we'll get this built."

Hannig also said that none of the money from the federal stimulus plan would be used for the bridge's construction because Congress specified that stimulus-funded projects must be "shovel-ready."

"This really isn't ready to go at the moment," he said. "But we did a lot of good work around the area with the stimulus, but not the bridge project."

About \$627 million from the federal stimulus fund has gone to Illinois, alone, Hannig said, along with about \$300 million to local governments.

LaHood said this has helped put thousands of Illinois workers back to work across the state. He also defended the federal "cash for clunkers" program, which will be ending Monday after less than a month and much earlier than the initial deadline. Within four days of the date that the president signed the bill, dealers sold 250,000 cars in four days. To date, more than 500,000 cars have been sold.

"This is one of the most wildly, successful programs ever implemented that I can remember in the 30 years I have been in politics or public service," he said.

There were reports Friday that some car dealers had gotten out of the program before the deadline because they have not been compensated, even just weeks after Congress added another \$2 billion into the program, because of slow processing by the Department of Transportation. LaHood urged patience.

"You're going to be paid. Don't stop selling cars. You are going to be reimbursed," he said.

To lay all of the blame on the Department of Transportation is not quite fair, LaHood said, because the department found some applications for the program to be faulty and held up the process of compensating the dealers. This weekend, more than 2,000 people will be processing applications.

"I say to any dealer, sell cars till Monday at 8 p.m., and that's when the program ends, and that's when we believe that we will have gone through the \$3 billion that Congress has given us," he said.