

Keep new sales tax revenue for roads

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Government officials get excited with the promise of new money, and so it is with the new sales tax revenue Will County will receive from the mass transit funding bill agreed to by the governor and the Legislature. The bill promises almost \$20 million in new dollars to the county in its first full year of collection.

As the fastest-growing county in Illinois and one of the fastest growing in the country, Will County government is under a lot of pressure to expand public services. It's only natural that county officeholders and department heads want to latch on to any source of new money for their needed projects.

As critical as those needs may be, it is the position of the Will County Center for Economic Development that every cent of the new sales tax revenue should be spent on needed road improvements in Will County. After all, it was the intent of the governor and legislators that the money be used for roads to soften the increase in the sales tax to fund mass transit.

The county has identified \$1.5 billion of necessary road projects between now and the year 2030; almost \$140 million in the next three years alone. There is no identified revenue stream to fund these projects. While \$20 million a year helps, it still is not enough to fix the burgeoning road and congestion problems facing our county and our citizens.



Greuling

It is important to note that the new sales tax revenue for Will County is the only new road money on the table. The governor vetoed the bill to allow Will County voters to decide whether they want to pay a local gas tax for road improvements. The governor and the Legislature also failed to enact a new capital program. Will County has been exploring impact fees on development to pay for roads, but that hasn't happened yet.

The other benefits of the Regional Transportation Authority legislation to Will County are clear: Beginning April 1, Will County will have its own member on the RTA board of directors. We think County Executive Larry Walsh's appointment to this seat, J.D. Ross, former Joliet Junior College president, is an excellent choice for this key position. In addition, for the first time, the Chicago collar counties hold a veto-proof majority on the RTA, and they collectively will receive more public transit money from the RTA than Chicago. Buses and trains take cars off the roads, reducing congestion and wear and tear.

The CED believes the use of the new sales tax money is the best solution today to our transportation crisis in Will County. This tax will provide a growing revenue stream as the retail sector continues to expand in the county -- a revenue stream that can be bonded for major capital investments in our roads and highways. Of course, it's not enough. The Legislature and the governor need to agree on a capital plan this spring. The governor's veto of the gas tax legislation needs to be challenged. But that new RTA sales tax revenue is all we have for now. Every cent of it should be spent on local roads.

John Greuling is president and chief executive officer of the Will County Center for Economic Development.