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Cook County districts may receive funding for transportation projects

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Evanston may receive funds from county coffers to tackle transportation infrastructure projects next year. Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle announced last week that she is including half a million dollars to be allocated to each county district for transportation projects in the Board of Commissioners' 2017 proposed budget.

The plan, if passed, would allocate \$500,000 to each district, in an effort to create equity among districts for transportation projects, Preckwinkle said at a budget hearing last week.

In August, Preckwinkle approved the first long term transportation plan since 1940 when Cook County laid the foundation for many of the expressways currently used today.

“In the 70 years since the County’s last strategic transportation plan, the commitment and investment in our infrastructure has declined,” Preckwinkle wrote in the plan. “It’s time Cook County not only had a seat at the table, but also played a leadership role in creating a modern transportation system that meets changing consumer needs and responds to the demands of a twenty-first century economy.”

Cook County Commissioner Larry Suffredin said the proposal would strengthen relationships between local municipalities and the Cook County Department of Transportation and Highways.

Local agencies will now be able to work with the commissioner and the department to suggest local project proposals such as new roads, bike lanes and traffic lights, Suffredin said.

“We have some districts where in the past there have been almost no (recent) transportation projects,” Suffredin said. “The idea at the end of this is that we will have in every district some kind of a presence of county money being used to further a general transportation program.”

Suffredin said the money will help communities that have struggled in the past with getting projects off the ground.

No new taxes will be raised to fund the program, superintendent of the Department of Transportation and Highways John Yonan said. He said most of the money raised will be from motor fuel taxes that will be reallocated for transportation projects. He said his department will have \$45 million more to spend because of the diversion of motor fuel tax.

“We needed to be strategic about how money is being spent,” Yonan said. “This is an incredible opportunity that hasn’t been there for projects that are on the shelf. This will make those projects a reality.”

Yonan said because many projects cross district lines, the old system created competition between districts to search for funds.

For example, he said, if there were an Evanston bike path that crosses district lines, it would be left up to the local jurisdictions to go after competitive funds. The Long Range Transportation plan now allows districts to work together when searching for funds.

“Part of the Long Range Transportation Plan is connecting Cook County,” Yonan said. “We are doing something different now by looking at the entire county and the entire region and saying we want to be the enablers.”

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