

government

Rogers may be closer than ever on road funding

■ That's the feeling of those that traveled to Washington D.C. to lobby federal lawmakers

by **Bob Grawey**
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Rogers may be closer than ever in getting funding for a transportation project that will alleviate the city's worst traffic headache for local residents at the Highway 101/Diamond Lake Road intersection.

That is the feeling, City Administrator Steve Stahmer says, after a city council delegation went to Washington, D.C. March 15-17.

City staff and council members met with U.S. Rep. Erik Paulsen, R-Minnesota, and his legislative aide, and with U.S. Sen. Amy Klobuchar, D-Minnesota, and her top aide to talk about Rogers' transportation needs. The Rogers group also met with U.S. Rep. Jim Oberstar's chief of staff Bill Richards during the D.C. trip.

Stahmer says Rogers presented its flyover project, which would add a new two-lane exit ramp to westbound I-94 just before the Rogers exit. It would start near Cabela's and route commuter traffic over South Diamond Lake Road and deposit traffic onto northbound Highway 101 just beyond Maynards. The current Rogers exit would stay in place for local traffic access.

City officials were hopeful President Obama's stimulus package would provide funding for the \$14.5 million project. That is in doubt, however, if the Minnesota Department of Transportation

(MnDOT) diverts Minnesota's stimulus share to two mega transportation projects: the Highway 610 completion and the Highway 169/I-494 interchange reconfiguration. Those projects would drain available funding away from smaller projects such as the Rogers flyover.

Lawmakers advised Rogers officials to try getting the project included in the 2010 appropriations bill.

"We may be on the outside looking in," Stahmer says of the stimulus funding, "so we want to make sure we have both oars in the water. The appropriations process for 2010 starts fairly early in 2009, so we need to get this going."

Rogers is working with Paulsen's office in gathering requested information and in making application for inclusion in the House version of the appropriations bill. City staff is also working with Klobuchar's staff in making application to the Senate's version of that same bill.

Projects that stand a chance of making it into the final bill are referred to as "earmark" projects because they are projects that are given dedicated funding status within the bill. Rogers' flyover would be an earmark project.

Another part of the equation to the appropriations is whether projects have a regional impact. The flyover meets that initial criteria since it impacts a federal highway as well as a major trunk highway (101) which is designated as a future freeway.

Once Rogers provides

all the data Paulsen and Klobuchar need, it is up to them to move the project through and to get it included in the appropriations bill in their respective chambers.

But the Minnesota lawmakers have to rank all project applications they have received from around the state, and approve those they feel have the greatest merit.

If state legislators get behind the flyover project, Oberstar will likely throw his powerful support behind it as well. That will go a long way since he is chair of the transportation committee in Washington, D.C.

Oberstar's support will be needed as competition for appropriations funding goes beyond other Minnesota projects. Stahmer says transportation projects from around the nation vie for the funds, but he likes Rogers' chances.

"We're optimistic that if the stimulus money doesn't come through, we have some pretty good support from our legislators for the appropriations funding," Stahmer says.

If funding for the flyover is granted through the president's stimulus package, the appropriations funding will not be needed.

The next step for Rogers is to complete and submit applications to Paulsen and Klobuchar, which are near completion now.

It is unclear when the city would find out on whether it will get either the stimulus funding or be included in the 2010 appropriations bill.