

SOUTHEAST COMMUTER RAIL TRANSIT DISTRICT

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SOUTHEAST RAIL LINE ON TRACK TO NEXT LEVEL

Lansing– March 19, 2014 – The Southeast Commuter Rail Transit District board voted Wednesday to approve a \$650,000 budget for 2014 that will prepare the proposed rail line project for the engineering phase of the nearly \$800 million project.

The planned Southeast Service Line will link the 33 miles between Crete’s Balmoral Park and downtown Chicago’s LaSalle Street Station, with additional stops in Crete, Steger, South Chicago Heights, Chicago Heights, Glenwood, Thornton, South Holland, Dolton, as well as the 115th Street, Gresham and 35th Street/US Cellular Field stations on Chicago’s South Side.

The project was authorized in the 2005 federal transportation bill and METRA, Northeastern Illinois’ commuter rail agency completed the first phase Alternatives Analysis in 2010 that projected an average of 18,700 riders per weekday with annual operating costs estimated at \$28.8 million. Since then, the Southeast Commuter Rail Transit District has focused on eliminating any remaining technical capacity issues since the same railroad right-of-way has also been proposed for High Speed rail service from Chicago to St. Louis.

J. Wynsma, Chairman of the Transit District stated that adherence to the federal funding process was critical and that the District needs to take care “not to put the cart before the horse”. The Federal Transit Administration has a 3 step planning and approval process that includes an Alternatives Analysis, Preliminary Engineering and Final Design. “With funding from IDOT, DCEO and USDOT, the budget we approved today, allows us to stay on track and we look forward to moving into Preliminary Engineering by this time next year” said Wynsma.

John DeLaurentiis, the District’s Executive Director said that he was confident that the Capacity Analysis to be undertaken with the additional planning funds would support both the SES Line and High Speed Rail into Chicago’s LaSalle Street Station, but that the District had a back-up plan for a crossover to the METRA Electric line as some have recently proposed. That proposal would extend the Electric Line from its current terminus at University Park southward to the proposed South Suburban Airport and then loop northwards on the UP/CSX SES Line and then into the Electric Line’s Millennium Park Station, but according to DeLaurentiis, that proposal has its own share of capacity issues. DeLaurentiis also noted that new commuter rail lines are highly competitive and complex undertakings saying that to his knowledge, METRA has never planned and implemented an entirely new commuter line and that a project of this order and magnitude must be “done right”. “Existing freight rail lines are not automatic candidates for transit service” DeLaurentiis said, “that is what CMAP’s Regional Transportation Plan is for.”

Tom Vander Woude, Transportation Director of the South Suburban Mayor’s and Managers Association also briefed the District Board regarding the SES Line’s very high ranking on CMAP’s recent evaluation of proposed transportation improvements. J. Wynsma commented that the good news was yet another federally mandated milestone in favor of the SES Line and that “the technical implications of nearly 20,000 riders per day cannot be overlooked”.