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APRIL 2011

‘Better opportunity for a bright future’ Gov. Quinn signs bill in South Holland creating rail district

By Bob Bong

Mayor Don De Graff’s longtime dream of a Metra commuter rail line for South Holland and other southeast suburbs moved a step closer to reality last month when Gov. Pat Quinn signed legislation creating the Southeast Commuter Rail Transit District.

“This is just the beginning,” the Mayor said after watching Quinn sign the bill. This is a significant move that will help with the development of the Metra Southeast Service line.

“The southeast suburbs will be the mecca of economic development if we do this right,” he added. “This bill gives us a better opportunity for a bright future.”

At the March 7 ceremony in the South Holland Community Center, Quinn was joined by mayors or town representatives from 20 communities as well as state lawmakers who represent the southeast suburbs.

Quinn said the bill, sponsored by state Rep. Al Riley (D-Hazel Crest) and state Sen. Toi Hutchinson (D-Olympia Fields), will open up the southeast suburbs to economic development and job growth.

“The SouthEast Service Line will provide access to an underserved area while creating jobs, sparking economic development and improving the quality of life in the southeast suburbs,” Quinn said.



Regional leaders including (from left) State Rep. Al Riley, State Sen. Toi Hutchinson, Mayor Don A. De Graff and Hazel Crest Mayor Robert Donaldson applaud Gov. Pat Quinn’s signing of a bill creating the SouthEast Commuter Rail Transit District last month in South Holland.

The proposed rail line would run 33 miles from Chicago’s LaSalle Street station to Balmoral racetrack in Crete. Suburban stations would be built in Dolton, South Holland, Thornton, Glenwood, Chicago Heights, South

Chicago Heights, Steger, downtown Crete and at the Balmoral racetrack.

At a meeting in Tinley Park in September, Rep. Riley said what makes the project an easy sell is that more than 90 percent of the rail line

would be on existing track.

“This is just the first step,” Riley told the packed house that gathered to watch Quinn sign the bill, alluding to other transit proposals for the south suburbs including an airport in Peotone and the Illiana Expressway connecting I-57 with I-65 in Indiana.

“This would not have been possible without a governor who means it when he says he cares about the south suburbs,” Riley said.

Hutchinson said the cooperation among elected officials to push the rail line is the sign of things to come for the Chicago Southland.

“This sends a strong message about how serious we are to be considered a region,” she said. “We have shown how strong we can be if we work together.”

The estimated \$778 million cost would be split 60-40 between the federal government and local agencies.

Rick Bryant, chief of staff for U.S. Rep. Jesse Jackson Jr. (D-Chicago) whose district includes the proposed rail line, said the federal portion of the project has already been approved.

“All we need to go forward is the local matching share,” said Bryant.

Finding the local contribution will be easier now that the commuter district has been created, said De Graff. Funding will be sought from a variety of sources, he added.