

**Letter to the SouthtownStar Editor:**

I am writing in response to the article "Another Lost Fight for the South Suburbs" authored by Guy Tridgell on February 11<sup>th</sup>. We appreciate that the reporter is paying attention to the transportation issues facing our region. I am writing to dispel some of the notions written in the article, however.

As an urban planner and statistician; and more importantly as the State Representative for the 38<sup>th</sup> district, I have always had a regional development plan for the south suburban region. Transportation issues being a vital component, the 95<sup>th</sup> General Assembly saw the entire Chicago Southland Caucus collaborating on transportation related issues and more.

Regarding the EJ&E, I was overwhelmed by the responses made by ordinary citizens voicing their opinion against the acquisition. I submitted a statement opposing the CN purchase at the regional hearing held in the Matteson that was sponsored by the federal Surface Transportation Board. Citizens, municipal officials and councils of governments, such as the South Suburban Mayors & Managers Association spoke out against the acquisition. I'd like to point out to Mr. Tridgell that all of this was done was on the basis of collaboration. These groups and entities have always had good relationships with each other over the years and we were of the same mind regarding this issue. Arguably, that acquisition would have taken place long ago had not the aforementioned groups come together and been strong in their advocacy opposing it.

The second issue is the 57/294 Interchange. It is one of only two places in the entire country where there is not an interchange between two major interstate highways. Development of this interchange will open up ports of entry into the South Suburbs, aiding in the creation of increased commerce. The reduction of local transportation gridlock will also be a needed consequence of the interchange. Representative Bob Rita fought extremely hard for the funding for this vital interchange in the 95<sup>th</sup> General Assembly. As chairman of the Tollway Oversight Committee, he brought Springfield policy development to Blue Island in 2007. This facilitated vital local input which might have been difficult if the hearing had been held in Springfield. He was successful in negotiating with IDOT and the Tollway in securing funding for Phase II of the project. Roughly \$16.5 million was appropriated in the 95<sup>th</sup> General Assembly in order to leverage \$3 million secured by Congressman Jesse Jackson, Jr. for land acquisition. Recently, in this very newspaper, the Illinois Tollway Authority announced their commitment to fully fund the construction of the interchange. Again, this could not have happened without legislative, local and interagency collaboration.

The third issue is the South Suburban Airport. As we speak, the SSA site plan as submitted by the IDOT Department of Aeronautics is in the hands of the Federal

Aviation Administration. That plan, which is extremely similar to the plan developed the Abraham Lincoln National Airport Commission, is awaiting certification by the FAA. Part of the importance of submitting a plan of any type came about when I was analyzing appropriation levels for the airport since 1999. I found that there were unspent dollars to the tune of approximately \$18 million. These monies were originally available for land acquisition and I asked that they be re-allocated in FY2008. In last year's development of a capital bill framework, the Chicago Southland Caucus tirelessly advocated for monies to be appropriated to airport construction.

The Southland Caucus also worked in collaboration on the Mass Transit bill. We worked extensively with the House & Senate sponsors of the bill and the RTA. I fought for regional equity in the mass transit bill by creating a Regional Equity subcommittee in the Spring of 2007. The committee met at Colin Powell Middle School in Matteson to address the transportation issues and funding inequities facing our region. Again, the Southtown Star advertised the event and even wrote an article highlighting the committee discussions from CTA, Metra, PACE and the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP).

Among the accomplishments of the Southland Caucus includes: developing regional representation on the Metra Board, ensuring viability of the Suburban Community Mobility Fund specifically for the South Cook region, providing additional monies to PACE, and strengthening diversity representation on the citizens service boards. Another part of the transportation bill included creation of the I.C.E. fund for innovative transportation grants. As reported by this paper, the Rich Township Transportation Department was the winner of a competitive grant to improve transportation for senior services. There are many more things that I can point out regarding legislative collaboration on Southland issues. However, many constituents, elected officials and community based organizations are already aware of the many initiatives that we have worked on together.

Keep in mind these were not small feats of achievement. There were times where we were essentially told to be happy with the "scraps" that we were given in the initial mass transit bill write up. However, the Southland Caucus did not find this acceptable and were strident and untiring in our effort to ensure our region had a voice.

My door is always open and my phone number is known; as are the other legislators. We don't legislate by anecdote. I would hope that, in the future, an attempt will be made to find out exactly what is going on. Query the people who are involved rather than report on the basis of speculation, misinformation or just lack of knowledge. Let us all be involved in thinking about the grand possibilities of our region.