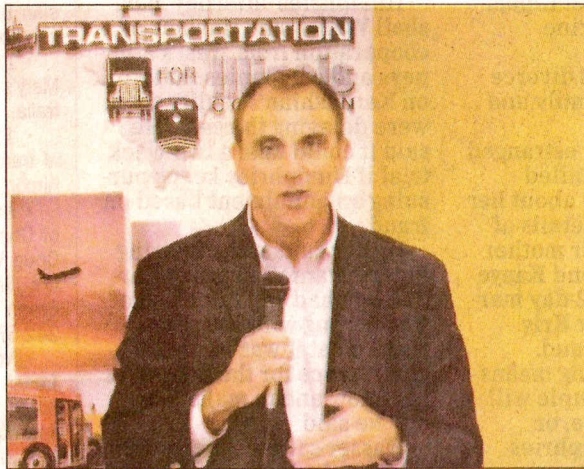


Mt. Vernon hosts transportation summit

FUTURE OF TRANSPORTATION — Sean O'Neill of the Associated General Contractors of America discusses some of the key points of the Federal Public Transportation Act of 2012 at a summit held Wednesday at the Mt. Vernon Airport. The summit was sponsored by the Transportation for Illinois Coalition.



Sentinel Photo/MATT BARBA

BY MATT BARBA

MT. VERNON MANAGING EDITOR

MT. VERNON — With a rich history of railroads and Interstate 57 and 64 being torn up for expansion, Mt. Vernon was an almost ideal place to hold a summit discussing the importance of various transportation issues affecting Southern Illinois.

The summit began Wednesday morning at the Mt. Vernon Airport Banquet room with comments from Doug Whitley, chairman and CEO of the Illinois Chamber of Commerce and co-founder of the Transportation for Illinois Coalition, who said the southern part of the state needs to develop a list of priorities related to transportation

infrastructure.

“Southern Illinois needs to do the same thing the Chicago region did and develop a list of what are the most important projects. We need to have a good sense for what all of the priority projects are for the region,” said Whitley.

He added, “We know it’s roads and bridges, as opposed to other modes of transportation, but where that focus should be needs to be decided.”

Whitley’s comments, and the summit, come at a time when the State of Illinois is winding down funding for capital projects that were included in the Illinois Jobs Now! bill that was signed by Gov. Pat Quinn in 2009. The list of prior-

ities, he said, needs to be developed before the Illinois General Assembly meets next year and begins discussing a new capital improvement bill.

“When you leave ... start that dialogue so when we get into that next capital bill we’ll be much more clearly defined as to what our needs are,” said Whitley. “We’ll know what we can do to bring jobs to Southern Illinois and promote economic development.”

Also welcoming the wide variety of transportation officials, both from the state and local levels, as well as those representing private interests in the form of Illinois’

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road and general labor contractors, was Mayor Mary Jane Chesley.

"It's appropriate the city of Mt. Vernon was chosen for this summit because we are a city on the move right now. It's exciting times," said Chesley, referencing the expansion of Interstate 57 and 64, as well as the continued support of three major railroads in the community and the Mt. Vernon Airport itself.

"We work very hard to collaborate our efforts because transportation routes are vital for this city and for Southern Illinois," she said.

A portion of Wednesday's summit included a presentation by Sean O'Neill, director of Congressional Relations on Infrastructure Advancement for the Associated General Contractors of America, who explained some of the aspects of the Federal Public Transportation Act of 2012 (FPTA) and how the bill will affect transportation infrastructure improvements in Illinois.

FPTA was signed into law last month and it reauthorizes the federal government's transportation programs at funding levels similar to their current ones for the next 26 months, as well as consolidates some of the nation's transportation programs into "core programs," O'Neill said. The bill also

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reduced the amount of time it takes for contractors to get a project started, which proponents of the bill hope will mean more projects get started and are completed.

FPTA will provide "stable funding through [fiscal year] 2014," said O'Neill. The majority of funding will go to road and bridge projects, rather than beautification projects, he added.

O'Neill said one of the key highlights of the bill is that it was actually passed by a deeply partisan Congress.

"Congress actually responded to our country's surface transportation needs," he said, adding that the bill "is a bit of a band aid. ... In this climate they saw the need to do something, even though right now they're not doing much."

Last month's bill, O'Neill explained, is just one of 61 bills that the U.S. House and Senate have passed this year, a number that he does not expect to increase much in between now and November's election.

TRANSPORTATION'S FUTURE

The future of transportation legislation in Illinois and America will also be affected by greater oversight of the U.S. Department of Transportation is doing.

O'Neill said additional funding for future infrastructure improvements will be the next step and he sees that being an increase to the Motor Fuel Tax, as well as implementation of a vehicle miles traveled tax, a policy that would tax motorists based on the miles driven.

"Our job is to let elected officials know that you support reforms, it's a good program worthy of federal dollars," said O'Neill of the bill. "We have to work to build support for additional funding and look to long-term solvency with the [Dedicated Highway and Bridge] trust fund."

He added, "Mt. Vernon is an example of what a well functioning transportation network can mean for eco-

nomie development."

The summit was also scheduled to include a panel by Mary Ellen Bechtel, Jefferson County Development Corporation, and Ted Shekell, City of O'Fallon planning director.

Other portions of the summit were scheduled to include a panel on the economic impact of transportation investment by Mary Ellen Bechtel of Jefferson County Development Corporation and Ted Shekell, City of O'Fallon planning director.

Jeff South, bureau chief for the Illinois Department of Transportation's Statewide Program Planning, also gave a rundown of the various projects that the agency has completed in recent years, thanks in large part to Illinois Jobs Now!, the first capital bill the state had passed in a decade.

Chesley said of the summit, "It was a great honor for the city of Mt. Vernon to host this."

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FRIEND TO TRANSPORTATION — Sen. John O. Jones, R-Mt. Vernon, RIGHT, receives a special recognition from Matt Davidson of the Associated General Contractors of Illinois for his work in representing Southern Illinois' interests in Springfield over the last two decades. Davidson called Jones a friend of transportation and a hard worker for the people of the region. Jones was recognized at a summit held Wednesday by the Transportation for Illinois Coalition.