

Charles Schumer pitches in on push to fill Inner Loop

Secretary Ray LaHood about his support for the loop project. A DOT spokesman declined to discuss the Rochester project or its chances of approval.

Construction

If you fill it, they will come.

That was the message coming from Sen. Charles Schumer and Rochester Mayor Thomas Richards Tuesday morning on North Union Street, a stone's throw from where they hope to see a portion of the Inner Loop Expressway filled in to create a vibrant, tree-lined city street running through and complementing the East End entertainment district.

"We have to think about (Rochester) not as it was, but how it can be," Richards said.

Removing part or all of the Inner Loop, built in the 1950s to ease downtown traffic, has been talked about for decades. Tuesday's announcement detailed Schumer's support of the city's application this week for a \$15 million federal grant to pay for the majority of a \$20 million Inner Loop project.

Plans call for filling in a below-grade stretch of the expressway that's about two-thirds of a mile long, starting at Monroe Avenue near Strong Museum and extending past East Avenue to Charlotte Street. It'd create "a boulevard that will reconnect neighborhoods" such as Monroe Village and Park Avenue to the East End, Schumer said.

He wrote a letter to U.S. Department of Transportation

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would start in the fall of 2013 and be complete in two years. More than 300 construction jobs would be generated, and there's potential for thousands of jobs if the project attracts restaurants, shops, housing, etc. Richards said he hopes it would encourage more bicyclists and walkers downtown, too.

"This will be a game-changer for downtown," Schumer said.

The money would come from a federal TIGER grant (Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery). The part of the loop in question is underused, Richards said, and serves only about 7,000 vehicles a day, according to Rochester's transportation specialist Erik Frisch.

According to the Landmark Society of Western New York, traffic is down 25 percent on the Inner Loop in part because the city's population is 210,565 compared to 332,488 in 1950. But Richards thinks the project could help change that.

"I want you to have a hard time getting out of here. I want you to live here. I want you to work here and I want you to play here," the mayor said. "I want this to be a kind of place not that you come and go in an automobile from but that you appreciate living in."

When pressed on whether he truly expects the project to attract new businesses, Richards said the East End is already doing just that. He also said it's important to

consider the benefits and savings over the long haul — 20 to 30 years.

The timing of the project also makes sense for a few reasons, Richards said. The city can save about \$2 million by taking fill dirt from a redevelopment project at the Port of Rochester and using it to be "dumped in this ditch," he said, referring to that part of the Inner Loop.

He also said the city and state would save on Inner Loop bridge repair, scheduled for 2014, and road maintenance. Costs to keep up that part of the Inner Loop, including three traffic signals and 70,000 square feet of retaining walls, are estimated at \$23.7 million over the next 30 years, according to a 2008 report by Stantec Consulting Services. It was hired by the city to study the project's potential.

"This (redevelopment) is working in other (cities). Why not Rochester?" Schumer said.

The Genesee Transportation Council — a local metropolitan planning organization —

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recently made the Inner Loop project its top priority by a unanimous vote. The GTC includes representatives from the nine-county Genesee/Finger Lakes region.

"I'm here today because all of us want to see it go," Schumer said, standing next to Richards, Strong museum President and CEO Rollie Adams and Downtown Development Corp. President Heidi Zimmer-Meyer.

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TIGER grants

Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery (TIGER) are federal grants for innovative transportation projects that create jobs. There is \$527 million available for the third and final round of TIGER grants this year, according to the United States Department of Transportation.

The first two rounds provided \$2.1 billion to 126 transportation projects in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. More than 2,500 applications were received over the first two rounds. A U.S DOT spokesman said third-round winners should be announced by the end of the year.

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