



January 31, 2004

Honorable Richard Durbin  
U.S. Senator  
267 Russell Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Durbin:

As you know, the Village of Oak Park has been quite concerned in recent years about the potential effects of the Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT) proposal to expand the Eisenhower Expressway (I-290) as it passes through Oak Park, and the apparent reluctance to objectively consider reasonable transit alternatives. We have visited with you and your staff to discuss this issue on several prior occasions, and we are most grateful for the understanding and assistance you have provided. Although we are still far from a satisfactory conclusion to this complex problem, we believe that with your help, much progress has been made in the past year toward a balanced and comprehensive analysis of all reasonable options for the Central Cook-DuPage County Transportation Corridor. We are planning a trip to Washington later this spring to renew our discussions on this issue, and we look forward to seeing you then.

However, we understand that significant activity on the federal transportation legislation may occur within the next few weeks. As you know, portions of that legislation go to the heart of our issues in Oak Park. In general, the Village supports a significant increase in transportation funding, preferably to the original House bill levels as funds are in short supply for all types of transportation projects, and particularly transit and road funds that are shared with local communities. We urge you to oppose the Senate Finance Committee funding levels as they significantly shortchange and reduce transit funding over time, significantly underfunding transit at a time when just the opposite is needed to reduce congestion. In particular, we ask your assistance with respect to the following issues in the upcoming deliberations on the federal transportation bill:

**I-290 Expansion**

No funding should be earmarked or otherwise set aside for the I-290 expansion project in the pending federal legislation. The approval process for the highway proposal has been delayed, and the 2030 Regional Transportation Plan (RTP) for the Chicago area recently created a new Cook-DuPage County Transportation Corridor, listing a number of potential transit options to be studied including the I-290 highway proposal. The Regional Transit Authority (RTA), in conjunction with IDOT, has begun a detailed study of the available options for the Corridor. We support this approach, as laid out in recently approved 2030 RTP, and will continue to participate extensively as the RTA study progresses. We are hopeful that the RTA study will be structured to comply with the current federal requirements for metropolitan planning and environmental review, and that it eventually will result in selection of reasonable and effective alternatives in compliance with federal law. However, the process has only just begun, and the 2030 RTP makes it clear that the required federal studies have not been completed for

the I-290 expansion proposal. Under these circumstances, where the required studies have not been completed nor any locally preferred project identified by an objective multi-modal analysis, no federal funding for expansion of I-290 should be designated as part of this legislation.

### **Oak Park Cap**

As we have discussed, a major project that should be considered in conjunction with any renovation or possible expansion of I-290 through Oak Park is construction of a cap over the expressway to reconnect the Village with park land, green space, commuter facilities, bicycle and other intermodal improvements over the expressway. The cap would be intended to mitigate air quality and other existing and future impacts on Oak Park if the expressway, whether it is reconstructed or expanded, and to repair the division in the community that was created when the expressway originally was built. The project also would provide congestion mitigation and air quality benefits through the addition of the new intermodal facilities on top of the cap at grade level.

Given the importance of the Oak Park Cap as a measure for mitigating both traffic congestion and adverse environmental impacts, and considering the significant federal funding that has been devoted to the cap study to date, the next phase of the cap study process should be funded by the pending federal legislation. At the end of 2002, the Village was awarded \$200,000 in federal funding through the Illinois Tomorrow program (with a \$25,000 matching contributions from both the State and the Village) to study the feasibility of constructing a cap over the Eisenhower Expressway in Oak Park as part of any major reconstruction of I-290 or possible expansion of the I-290 corridor. A cap has the potential to improve air quality and noise impacts, improve community cohesion, enhance transportation options, rebuild transit stations, and rebuild the aging expressway in a context sensitive manner. This study is now well underway ([www.captheikestudy.com](http://www.captheikestudy.com)).

Last year, the Village requested that the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, Subcommittee on Highways and Transit, authorize and provide further funding of the Oak Park Cap study. The request was submitted through Rep. Danny K. Davis, whose district includes Oak Park. The proposed I-290 project is currently in the Phase I preliminary engineering and environmental level of study by IDOT. The Village request, supported by Governor Blagojevich, is for additional federal funding to conduct the next stage of preliminary engineering and environmental studies for Oak Park Cap so that Cap planning proceeds on a parallel path as the Expressway planning. This would enable a cap project to be incorporated into the rebuilding of the I-290, which is expected to result in construction cost efficiencies over a cap project implemented separately. This issue is vitally important to the citizens of the Village. Nothing less than the future of our homes, our businesses and our quality of life is at stake. In the upcoming debate on the federal transportation legislation, we urge you to support, and actively seek, federal funding for further study of the Oak Park Cap.

### **Transit Funding**

As discussed above, the 2030 RTP for the Chicago area establishes a new Central Cook-DuPage County Transportation Corridor, which includes Oak Park, and recommends consideration of several transit alternatives in this corridor in addition to the highway proposal. The Regional Transit Authority has recently begun a study of the transit alternatives recommended in the 2030 RTP, including the following specific proposals:

- ◆ CTA Blue Line west extension
- ◆ METRA Union Pacific West Line upgrade
- ◆ Ogden Avenue Transitway
- ◆ PACE Cermak Road bus rapid transit and signal preemption
- ◆ DuPage J Line bus rapid transit and signal preemption

We urge you to support the federal funding necessary to complete evaluation of these transit proposals in the metropolitan planning process, and to implement the proposals chosen as preferred alternatives. In addition, we strongly support the CTA's proposal to create a Circle Line, which would have the effect of doubling the capacity of the Blue Line to serve Oak Park and beyond into the western suburbs. We feel that these transit projects have the potential to alleviate pressure on I-290, and address congestion in a much preferable and long-lasting manner than will continued reliance on highway expansion.

### **Metropolitan Planning and Environmental Review**

Under the rubric of "streamlining," various versions of the pending legislation include various proposals to abbreviate the current process for metropolitan transportation planning and environmental review. We urge you to oppose any significant revision of the current process. While in theory it may be possible and would certainly be beneficial to efficiently advance projects agreed to be beneficial, too often "streamlining" proposals are utilized to undermine existing and necessary environmental protections in the name of efficiency. In our experience, the current process does not cause unnecessary delay if compliance with the process is full and prompt. More importantly, compliance with processes similar to those currently required is essential to ensure sound resolution of extremely complex transportation planning issues and complete protection of public health, safety and the environment.

In particular, we are opposed to any attempts to relax the mandatory review and mitigation of effects on historic properties and public parks currently required under Section 4(f) of the Department of Transportation Act of 1966. Oak Park is well known for its stately old homes and outstanding architecture. The Village is home to more than 300 buildings of historical or architectural significance, designed by many famous and original architects: Frank Lloyd Wright, George W. Maher, William Drummond, John Van Bergen, Patton and Fisher, E.E. Roberts and others. Side-by-side with these masterpieces are smaller scale modest homes, landmark apartment buildings, and commercial structures -- all framed by a network of parks and tree-lined streets that establish the special character of the community. Adjacent to the Eisenhower Expressway is the Gunderson National Historic District, other locally designated historic districts or landmarks, and several properties eligible for listing on the national register for landmarks including the Oak Park Conservatory. Also adjacent to the Eisenhower Expressway, and threatened by the potential expansion of it, is the landmarked Columbus Park in Chicago bordering Oak Park, designed by the famed Jens Jensen. Oak Parkers treasure this priceless heritage and appreciate that the preservation of these structures and public areas greatly enhances the quality of life in the Village.

In addition, the largest and most rapidly growing industry in Oak Park is tourism. The architectural treasures discussed above, as well as the birth home of native son Ernest Hemingway, have brought tens of thousands of people into Oak Park each year. Additional attention has recently been paid to other historical sites and people too. The promotion of tourism without undue stress on the citizens, the infrastructure, or the attractions themselves, is an important challenge for the coming decades. Our ability to meet this challenge would be

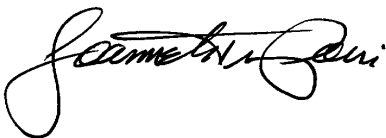
substantially limited if the protections provided by Section 4(f) are reduced, particularly in view of current plans to reconstruct or expand the Eisenhower which is adjacent to numerous public parks and historic buildings and landmarks. Section 4(f) has worked well over the years because it requires transportation planners to look for prudent alternatives to road building that would mar or destroy historic places. This search for the prudent alternative has saved so many places that are important community and neighborhood resources, not just historic places but parks, recreation areas, and wildlife refuges as well. We urge you to take all possible actions to ensure that the Section 4(f) protection is retained, and that any provisions designed to weaken it are omitted from the final legislation.

We also urge you to oppose any provision similar to Section 1601 of the Senate Committee bill (S. 1072), which appears to restrict funding of measures necessary to mitigate the public health impacts of highway construction and use. The provision appears to limit mitigation measures to "water pollution or environmental degradation," and to limit the costs of such measures to 20% of the total cost of the transportation project. We are extremely concerned that this provision could be interpreted to preclude mitigation measures necessary to protect public health from the adverse effects of emissions to air from increased traffic on renovated or expanded highways. As discussed above, the Village has received substantial state and federal funding to study the feasibility of the Oak Park Cap as a measure to mitigate the adverse air quality impacts from the existing or expanded highway. We believe that all feasible measures to mitigate such impacts are essential to protect the health and welfare of the citizens of the Village. It now appears that this new provision in the Senate bill could restrict any such efforts to 20% of the cost of any related projects to reconstruct I-290, and could conceivably prevent expenditure of *any* federal funds for that purpose.

As currently written, this provision appears to provide at least some protection for plants, animals, waters and the environment, but none for the health of the local citizens. We urge you to oppose any such attempts and to support efforts to clarify that mitigation measures necessary to protect public health are required and are not subject to any arbitrary or unreasonable cost limitations.

Thank you for your support in each of the subject areas outlined above. As always, many thanks for your efforts on behalf of the Village and its citizens as the Village deals with the issues relating to the Eisenhower Expressway in Oak Park. Please do not hesitate to contact me or Deputy Village Manager Pete Dame at 708.358.5770 regarding these issues.

Sincerely,  
VILLAGE OF OAK PARK



Joanne E. Trapani  
Village President