

LEGISLATURE 2010

Romer names his Colfax desire: streetcars

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State Sen. Chris Romer plans to introduce a bill today that would take a portion of higher vehicle registration fees and flow the money to a special district that would coordinate financing, construction and operation of a streetcar line on Colfax Avenue in Denver and Aurora.

"It's been a dream of mine to restore streetcars to Colfax; they change the way people live," said the 50-year-old Romer, D-Denver, who grew up not far from the area's longest street.

The state began collecting higher registration fees after last year's legislature passed the FASTER transportation measure to pay for highway, bridge and transit improvements.

Officials estimated that FASTER boosted the average annual vehicle registration by about \$40.

Romer's bill would siphon \$4 from the registration surcharges paid by vehicle owners living within one mile of the proposed streetcar route and forward that money to the special district.

Romer, who works as a public finance consultant, said he does not yet know precisely how much money the registration-fee set-aside would raise for the streetcar project. But he estimates it will be enough make a serious bid for federal funds from the Obama administration's new urban Livability Initiative that is making \$280 million available nationally for streetcars, "urban circulators" and other transit projects.

The initiative, a collaboration of the federal Transportation and Housing and Urban Development departments and the Environmental Protection Agency, is offering a maximum of \$25 million per project.

Romer's proposal calls for the High Performance Transportation Enterprise, which was established by the FASTER bill, to study the feasibility of setting up a public-private partnership that would assist in the development of the Colfax streetcar line.

Legislators gave the Transportation Enterprise the ability to explore bonding and other financing mechanisms that could blend public and private dollars for building and operating transportation projects.

Setting aside a portion of the registration-fee surcharge for a specific transportation project is consistent with the intent of the law, said Sen. Suzanne Williams, D-Aurora, vice-chair of the Senate Transportation committee.

"It fits all the criteria we set up for FASTER and the public-private partnerships," she said of Romer's bill. "I think it's a grand idea."

Denver officials separately are conducting a Colfax Streetcar Feasibility Study, and Romer said his proposal can dovetail with the city's effort.

According to Denver's study, RTD's 15 and 15L bus routes on East Colfax get the heaviest use in the transit agency's system.

The return of streetcars to Colfax "has always been a popular idea," said Denver City Council member Jeanne Robb, whose district covers a portion of the East Colfax route. "The question has always been how to fund it."

"That's what is attractive about Sen. Romer's bill," Robb said. "It could attract more investment in terms of getting that streetcar in place."

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