

Bonding Bill

[published by Mark Fischenich, Free Press Staff Writer, The Free Press, Mankato, MN]

ST. PAUL — Mankato-area construction projects avoided getting caught up in disputes in the state House Tuesday afternoon and remained in the bonding bill that overwhelmingly passed the House early Tuesday night.

Several amendments were offered that attempted to eliminate funding for certain projects or aimed to shift funding from one project to another, but none targeted nearly \$12 million in the bill for construction projects in south-central Minnesota.

Passage of the \$817 million bill for bond-funded construction projects statewide means all three participants in establishing a final bill have now made their preferences known.

A conference committee of representatives and senators, who passed a \$1 billion construction bill earlier this year, will now be appointed to work out a compromise bill. Aides to Gov. Tim Pawlenty, who proposed \$816 million of projects, also will be heavily involved in the negotiations because Pawlenty can effectively veto individual projects if he isn't satisfied with the compromise legislation.

Republicans and Democrats alike praised Rep. Dan Dorman, the Republican chairman of the House Capital Investment Committee that produced the bill.

"It was very inclusionary," said Rep. Bob Gunther, R-Fairmont. "There's something for everybody in this bill."

The bonding bill, which lawmakers were supposed to complete a year ago, could become law by mid-March, Gunther said.

"I think everybody's ready to compromise," he said. "The Senate realizes they're not going to get everything. And we realize we're going to spend a little more than \$816 million."

While Democrats joined Republicans in voting for the bill in strong numbers, House Minority Leader Matt Entenza warned Republican leaders that the compromise bill that returns to the House from the conference committee will need to be better. Entenza, DFL-St. Paul, said the final bill will need to include more money for universities and transportation, including more for the Northstar commuter rail project from Minneapolis to Big Lake.

A minimum of 13 Democrats will need to vote for the final bill because, under the state constitution, it requires 81 votes in the House to borrow money. Republicans have just a 68-66 majority.

But Rep. John Dorn, DFL-Mankato, said partisanship fades quickly for most lawmakers when voting on the bonding bill. Instead, they look at how the bill treats the towns and institutions they care about.

"People will vote their districts," Dorn said.

And Dorman did a good job of including projects from around the state, including funding for a Minnesota State University science building that was crucial to getting Dorn's support.

All area lawmakers voted for the bill as it passed on a 121-12 vote. They were pleased with the bill overall and particularly happy with the number of local projects included. The \$11.6 million in local projects includes \$4.7 million for South Central Technical College, \$3.3 million for the St. Peter Regional Treatment Center, \$642,000 for a fire hall and police building in Blue Earth, \$500,000 for repairs to the Rapidan Dam and \$2.5 million for the Trafton Science Center at MSU.

The money for MSU and the regional treatment center is design money that, if included in the final bonding bill, is expected to lead to huge construction projects totaling more than \$93 million in the next decade. Two items not included in the House bill remain alive in the upcoming negotiations because they are supported by either the governor or the Senate: \$16.6 million for a new headquarters building for the Mankato-based District 7 of the Minnesota Department of Transportation and \$375,000 for a library and multicultural center in Gaylord.

Area lawmakers, satisfied to fight for those projects during the conference committee negotiations, made no attempts to add them during more than three hours of debate on the bill Tuesday. Other amendments were offered - most by opponents of \$10 million included for the Northstar project.

The \$10 million is \$27.5 million short of what is needed to construct the rail project, but it is significant because House Republicans had previously blocked all attempts to fund the project. Gov. Tim Pawlenty and the Senate are proposing the full \$37.5 million.

The first attempt to remove the funding this year was rejected on a 25-106 vote, but Rep. Mark Olson, R-Big Lake, persisted in offering various other Northstar-related amendments - none of which received more than 30 votes.

Rep. Phil Krinkie, a Republican who previously chaired the bonding committee, complained the bill was too large and would threaten the state's bond rating while driving up the portion of the state's general fund dedicated to paying off debt.

"The fastest-growing portion of the state budget is debt service," said Krinkie, who was strongly critical of Democrats for suggesting that the compromise bill must be larger.

That prompted a reaction from Rep. Tom Rukavina, DFL-Virginia, who suggested Krinkie's concern about debt was hypocritical. Rukavina noted that a few years ago Krinkie and House Republicans had voted to shift payment of \$400 million in construction projects from cash to borrowing to generate more funds for tax cuts.

"Rep. Krinkie, I love you," Rukavina said sarcastically. "You're better than me at standing up here and b.s.ing."

But the partisan sniping was minor compared to what was seen on major budget bills a year ago, and the strong bipartisan vote to pass the bill prompted applause from both sides of the aisle.