

State construction plan unveiled

Stony Island ramp to Bishop Ford among governor's spring projects

BY MONIQUE GARCIA
Tribune reporter

Gov. Pat Quinn marked the start of spring construction season Monday, announcing \$486 million in road and bridge projects that will soon be under way.

Most of the building will be funded through the state's \$31 billion public works program, which began in 2009 after lawmakers legalized video gambling and raised liquor taxes and driver's fees to pay for the multiyear plan.

Because video gambling didn't launch until September, Quinn had expressed concerns that the construction program was running low on money and some projects might have to be delayed. But the governor said that was resolved when lawmakers sent him a bill in January allowing for \$1.5 billion more in spending for construction and to prevent layoffs in the state's cash-strapped child welfare agency.

Among the projects touted by Quinn is the \$34 million rebuilding of the Stony Island feeder ramp to the Bishop Ford Freeway (I-94). The interchange, which is used by up to 64,000 vehicles each day, will undergo repairs that include reconstruction and removal of seven bridges, as well as resurfaced pavement and new signs and lighting.

Quinn hailed the construction program as a way to put people to work.

"When the private economy isn't going at full tilt, and it needs to get going, we've got to make sure we supplement that with our public investment in roads and bridges and water system and rail systems and building schools," Quinn said.

"All of this puts people to work and lays a foundation for future economic growth."

The state is scheduled to sell \$800 million worth of bonds next week to pay for new and ongoing construc-

tion projects.

The move comes two months after officials delayed an attempt to sell \$500 million worth of construction bonds in January, citing an "unsettled" market following a recent credit downgrade.

Despite Illinois having the worst credit ranking of all 50 states according to

Standard & Poor's and Moody's Investors Service, Quinn said he is confident the state will get a good deal this time around. He cited the passage of public employee pension reform legislation in the House last week, arguing that there's still work to be done but the movement sends a good sign to investors.

"We're not there yet, but that was a very significant step taken by the Illinois House of Representatives,"

Quinn said.

"I think that will serve us well in the market and serve us well as a state."

Fitch Ratings has assigned an A grade to the bonds scheduled for sale but kept Illinois on a "negative" credit watch, warning that a downgrade is possible if the state fails to achieve "meaningful" pension changes.

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HEATHER CHARLES/TRIBUNE PHOTO

U.S. Rep. Bobby Rush, left, and Shoshi Mabina, an IDOT training program coordinator, were on hand Monday for Gov. Pat Quinn's construction project announcement.

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