



## Cook County thinks improving transportation boosts south suburban economy

June 19, 2014 | Gregory Tejeda Times Correspondent

EAST HAZEL CREST, Ill. | When Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle spoke before a gathering of south suburban municipal officials Thursday about improvements to the south suburban economy, she made sure to have Transportation and Highways Superintendent John Yonan with her.

Because as it turns out, much of the accomplishments Preckwinkle cited for the south suburbs were actually assorted road repairs and reconstructions that she says will improve access to businesses located in the area.

“Good economic development policy and good transportation policy are connected,” Preckwinkle said to a gathering of the South Suburban Mayors and Managers Association. “There’s a synergy there.”

Among the major projects of benefit to the south suburbs, according to Preckwinkle, is the work scheduled to begin next year to rebuild 1.5 miles of Center Avenue south of 159th Street in Harvey.

That street runs parallel to railroad tracks used by Canadian National freight trains that pass through the south suburbs, and also provide access to the railroad’s Intermodal facility. Also on Center Avenue is a major distribution facility for United Parcel Service and for Allied Tube & Conduit.

The result of all these companies on that street is a constant flow of freight trucks that cause significant wear-and-tear to the road, and can make it difficult for people to get to those companies.

“Resurfacing it is not a definite solution,” said Preckwinkle, adding that the county plans to widen the street and erect more traffic signals to better control the traffic flow

Another project meant to improve access is work that was done along 151st Street in Phoenix, which is where Sterling Lumber Co. chose to relocate when they decided their long-time facility in Blue Island was inadequate for future needs.

The company, which also maintains facilities in Joliet and Gary, almost considered locating their main offices to the Northwest Indiana location as well.

But county highway officials came up with funds to improve access to the plant at 501 E. 151st St., allowing them to use the one-time Allied Tube facility for their offices.

Preckwinkle said the county considers southern Cook County a significant part of the overall region, citing \$6 million in grants the county received from state government, with \$1.5 million of that diverted to groups located within and of benefit to the south suburbs.

Preckwinkle also told south suburban officials – who included Lansing village President Norm Abbott, Crete village President Michael Einhorn and Chicago Heights Mayor David Gonzalez – about efforts to lay cables to improve broadband access throughout the county.

Those efforts include cables along Interstate 57 that will improve access at the county-run Oak Forest Hospital and the Sixth District county courthouse in Markham. “Those are our two most important facilities in the south suburbs,” Preckwinkle said, adding that all this is important to bolster the Chicago-area economy as a whole because Cook County accounts for 55 percent of jobs within a Chicago-area stretching from Milwaukee to Northwest Indiana.

“We’re the focal point of a tri-state region,” she said.