

County gets zip from Feds

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Lake County is striking out this month when it comes to federal funding. Requests for money for fixes on Highway 61 from Two Harbors through Silver Creek Township, and for a county-wide broadband project, have been denied in Washington.

U.S. Rep. Jim Oberstar said there was \$1.5 billion available in the grant for the road work but \$56 billion in requests. Only one Minnesota road project was funded.

"This will not be the last opportunity for Highway 61 and many other projects to get the funding they need," Oberstar wrote in a statement to the News-Chronicle. "The House has passed the Jobs for Main Street Act, which would make \$500 million available to (the Minnesota Department of Transportation). ... I am hopeful that the Senate will follow suit by passing a jobs bill which aggressively funds transportation projects."

Broadband hopes are still alive, even though the county's hopes of being accepted in the first round of funding by the Rural Utilities Service are gone. The county had planned on going after funding in the second round so it could include parts of St. Louis County that have been added to the project.

"We're obviously disappointed we didn't get in on the first round," said Gary Fields of National Public Broadband, the group working with the county on the project. He said the second chance of funding is more for "last-mile" projects like the one in Lake County, meaning service directly to homes. The first round was for building the basic network. County Commissioner Paul Bergman doesn't consider the rejection a "big deal." He said the second round suits the plan better. Fields said the strength of project is improved because the addition of places like Duluth Township and areas around Ely will show a better chance of economic growth.

The project would connect homes and businesses on the electrical grid with television, internet and phone services.

The Northeast Service Co-operative also has plans for a broadband infrastructure project that focuses on entities such as schools and libraries and connecting them through broadband. Bergman said if that gets funded, it would help with the counties emergency service management.

The reconstruction of Highway 61, between Two Harbors and the Silver Creek Cliff Tunnel, would widen the highway and address other safety issues, much like areas farther north. This summer, the highway near Split Rock Lighthouse State Park will be improved.

Oberstar said there will be more opportunities. "We are also moving ahead with the Surface Transportation Authorization Act, a six-year bill to upgrade and enhance our nation's transportation infrastructure," he said. "As the chief author of that bill, I am ensuring that states will be allocated more funding for essential projects. I'm not done fighting to get resources for vital transportation projects in Northeast Minnesota."

Losing out on the Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery grant money, or TIGER, "was not a big surprise," Bergman said. Other commissioners have echoed a similar tone at previous meetings about the project.

The Lake County bid was broader than fixes to the highway. Other projects listed under the application included an access road to downtown Two Harbors from the south to Eighth Avenue; building a Northern Lights Express rail station and maintenance facility in Two Harbors if the Minneapolis-to-Duluth, and ultimately North Shore, train project ever

comes to fruition; and a Silver Creek Township project to improve its sewer and water system along the shore.