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New grant will allow streetcar to reach The Banks

By Barry M. Horstman

The Cincinnati streetcar got an early Christmas present Thursday when U.S. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood formally announced that the project will receive nearly \$11 million in federal funds, allowing the system's initial route to be extended from Downtown to the riverfront.

At a City Hall news conference where he was flanked by Mayor Mark Mallory and six City Council members, LaHood, confirming earlier reports in *The Enquirer* and other media, said the streetcar would receive \$10.9 million, increasing the project's budget to nearly \$110 million.

The new grant, Mallory said, will allow the city to extend the streetcar line's southern end point from Downtown's Government Square three blocks to Second Street and the Banks, thereby linking the system to three major sports and entertainment venues, the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center and other riverfront attractions.

"This is a day of celebration," Mallory said. "This is a great day in Cincinnati."

Cincinnati's grant is among 46 federal awards made to transportation projects nationwide totaling \$511 million, selected from among 828 applications that had sought \$14 billion.

The city had requested nearly \$57 million to also stretch the streetcar line north to the Uptown communities around the University of Cincinnati. The fact that Thursday's award was less than one-fifth that amount, LaHood said, reflected the intense competition for the dollars, not tepid support for the project.

That point was underlined, LaHood said, by his decision to make Cincinnati one of three cities -- along with Chicago and Philadelphia -- that he visited Thursday to announce the Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery (TIGER) grants.

"When people are making their wish lists for Santa Claus, they don't get everything on the list," LaHood said, drawing laughter from the city officials and other top streetcar backers gathered in Mallory's office. "If they get part of it, they're happy."

Streetcar opponents, however, were clearly not happy.

Rep. Steve Chabot, R-Westwood, said he believes the federal money could have been better spent on the \$2 billion-plus Brent Spence Bridge replacement project, in which a second span across the Ohio River is to be built just west of the existing bridge.

"The Brent Spence Bridge has been deemed 'functionally obsolete' and is consistently named by our community as a top priority," Chabot said in written statement. "After all, didn't President Obama himself stand at the foot of the bridge just weeks ago, noting the importance of the Brent Spence replacement? ... I would contend that the bridge project is far more valuable to our community and would be a wiser use of these dollars."

Former Cincinnati congressman, mayor and councilman Tom Luken also questioned whether the grant violates an Ohio law adopted this year barring additional state or federal dollars from going to the streetcar project.

Mallory, however, said the Ohio law will not be an issue because the federal dollars will not be routed through Columbus on their way to City Hall. Moreover, Mallory and other top city officials regard the

Ohio measure, sponsored by state Sen. Shannon Jones, R-Springboro, as unconstitutional.

"The state can't tell Washington what to do," Mallory said after the news conference. "That won't be a problem."

Even with the new grant, which when added to previous awards raises Washington's commitment to the project to nearly \$40 million, the majority of the \$110 million that City Hall has targeted for the streetcar will be local money. City Council has approved \$64 million in bonds to build the system.

City leaders' strong leadership on the streetcar issue, combined with voters' rejection of Issue 48, an anti-streetcar measure on last month's ballot, helped lift Cincinnati's application from the hundreds submitted to the U.S. Department of Transportation, LaHood said.

"The local people here want it," LaHood said. "This is a good project...The people are the winners. They're going to have a form of transportation that they want."

Mallory said he expects construction to begin in the first quarter of next year, and city leaders hope to have the first phase -- which now will run from the riverfront to just north of Findlay Market -- completed by late 2013.

Cincinnati intends to continue pursuing funds to extend the streetcar into Uptown -- and ultimately, perhaps far beyond to the east, west, north and south.

In the long-term future, the streetcar conceivably could even cross the Ohio River into Covington. Patrick Ewing, who on Jan. 1 will retire as Cincinnati's economic development officer, told the Covington Business Council Thursday that he could envision the streetcar extending into Northern Kentucky within about five years.

"I would guess five years is not unrealistic to at least get the first leg of it, where it's going to connect to whatever central point is decided," Ewing said in a luncheon speech.

Cincinnati officials, however, characterized that as an exceedingly optimistic scenario. For the near future, their focus will be on areas north of the river -- in particular, on getting the streetcar up the hill from Over-the-Rhine to Uptown.

"It will be several transportation secretaries later" before the possibility of taking the streetcar to Covington is even a serious possibility, said Jason Barron, Mallory's public affairs director.

Reporter Mike Rutledge contributed to this story.
