

Altmire puts money on commuter rail

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U.S. Rep. Jason Altmire, D-McCandless, has delivered what he promised Alle-Kiski Valley officials: \$500,000 to further study establishing commuter trains to Downtown Pittsburgh.

Money that he secured in the current fiscal year as a member of the House Transportation Committee will lay the groundwork for the future rail service, he said of the idea that dates back to the 1990s and was previously explored by a consulting firm.

Mr. Altmire, who's running for re-election, presented the check to Allegheny and Westmoreland county officials Tuesday at a short meeting at the Oakmont Borough Building. The money is to be spent on new environmental and planning studies.

As the only local representative on the House Transportation Committee, he said he's in a prime position to gain additional funding when the federal transportation policy and spending bill known as SAFETEA is renewed next year.

"With record gas prices and increased congestion along Route 28, Western Pennsylvania needs to direct more resources toward developing mass transit," he said. "[This] is a step forward in getting the Allegheny Valley Commuter Rail up and running."

Officials promoting the idea are focusing on a "starter system" that would provide commuter trains on existing railways, mainly the Allegheny Valley Railroad that operates freight trains in the region. Plans include buying or leasing equipment and establishing a vehicle maintenance facility, several park-and-ride lots and small stations.

Mr. Altmire's office said the commuter rail project is estimated to cost \$131 million and would provide an average 1,900 rides on weekdays.

He announced approval of the Allegheny Valley Commuter Rail grant in December, along with \$500,000 to study commuter rail between the Mon Valley and Downtown. The Port Authority operated commuter trains to McKeesport -- the old PATrain -- until April 1989, when the trains were discontinued due to high costs and low ridership.

Mr. Altmire's spokeswoman, Tess Mullen, said while the Alle-Kiski proposal was studied previously, information must be updated to keep qualifying for federal approval and funding.

"This is the official take-off," she said. "This is a priority for Congressman Altmire. It's difficult to get money for these types of projects, so his position on the [transportation] committee is incredibly valuable."

Mr. Altmire promoted the project during a recent visit he arranged to the area by U.S. Rep. Jim Oberstar, D-Minnesota, longtime member and now chairman of the House Transportation Committee.