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Mason Corridor funding faces 'daunting' process this cycle

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The city faces an uphill battle in securing federal funding for the Mason Corridor project in the coming months.

"The process is set up in a way that is daunting," said Steve Wymer, a spokesman for Sen. Wayne Allard, R-Loveland.

Allard's office said Thursday the \$11.2 million earmark for the Mason project, which would include light-rail-like bus service, is in a Senate appropriations bill.

Wymer thinks the funding will ultimately come through, but it faces a couple of significant hurdles, including House Democrats' suspension of spending bills during a faceoff with Republicans over offshore oil drilling and earmarks.

In the Senate, Sen. Harry Reid, D-Nev., said he doubts the body will take up any annual spending bills until Pres. George W. Bush is out of office.

If that happens and Congress turns to a so-called continuing resolution to keep the government funded at current levels until it gets the appropriations bills, earmarks for projects such as Mason could disappear.

"They hack of a few hundred million (dollars) here, a few hundred there, and that's when things get dicey," Wymer said.

But there are reasons the funding could come through, even under that scenario, Wymer said. For one, the project funding isn't tied to any presidential political issues like, say, the Iraq war. And it's a priority for Allard, who is retiring from his seat.

If completed, the Mason Corridor project will be a 5-mile, north-south byway extending from Cherry Street on the north to south of Harmony Road that would include a bus rapid transit system and bike and pedestrian lanes, as well as a number of transit-oriented development sites.

City planners have called Mason Corridor the first step to a new transit system in Fort Collins that would eventually connect to other cities and the Denver metro area.

The project's total estimated price tag is \$74 million, with a lion's share, or 96 percent, coming from federal and state funding grants.

The City Council initially approved the use of \$2.5 million in this year's budget and gave up some land along the corridor for the project. In addition to the \$60 million in federal funds, the state would kick in \$8 million.

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