**Gov. Rauner approves Springfield railroad oversight commission bill**

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Gov. Bruce Rauner signed legislation Wednesday creating an oversight commission for the 10th Street railroad consolidation project in Springfield.

The nine-member commission will hold quarterly meetings and issue reports about the project's compliance in meeting state, federal and local minority employment and contracting goals.

Sen. Andy Manar, D-Bunker Hill, said the idea came from a town hall meeting he conducted in Springfield at which the rail project was raised.

"Organizations and individuals in Springfield were filing (open-records) requests regarding contracts, hiring and environmental remediation along the first phase," Manar said. "The requests were being denied by the city's previous administration and by (the Illinois Department of Transportation). That resulted in a great deal of frustration from community organizations and individuals who live along the route."

Manar said the commission isn't intended to complicate the process, but "so that individuals and organizations have a place they can go that meets regularly to answer questions regarding the city's involvement, the state's involvement, the county's involvement and private contractors' involvement in the project."

Six of the commission members are appointed by the four legislative leaders, one by Springfield's mayor and one by the governor. The final member is the ombudsman for the project, who is supposed to represent property owners in land acquisition proceedings along the relocation corridor.

However, the man appointed to that post, retired Sangamon County Judge Theodis Lewis, left the job in April after the state failed to complete a contract for the position.

"It's intended to be balanced and representative of the community," Manar said of the commission.

The first major project connected with the relocation plan is construction of a $20 million underpass on Carpenter Street between 11th and Ninth streets. Additional underpasses are also scheduled for Ash and Laurel streets.

The Carpenter Street underpass generated some controversy earlier this year when project work uncovered the foundations of old homes that were burned in the infamous 1908 Springfield Race Riot. A group of minority legislators contended that information about the foundations and other artifacts discovered by the project's work was withheld from the public. The company overseeing the project denied that was the case.

Manar said the idea for the commission was in the works before the artifact controversy. However, he said it underscored why a commission is needed.