

Work for All the Crafts

Building Normal's Multimodal Transit Hub into
Illinois' Second Busiest Amtrak Station



By Thomas Cafcas
& Greg LeRoy

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Cover photo credits & interior shots of Uptown Station: Thomas Cafcas, June of 2014. Worker photos courtesy of Mike Matejka of the Great Plains Laborers District Council.

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Executive Summary

In the depths of the Great Recession, the construction of Uptown Station in Normal, Illinois created almost 140,000 hours of work for at least 13 construction crafts. The station, the hub of a long-planned Uptown revitalization strategy, is succeeding by most measures: attracting \$220 million in private reinvestment for jobs and housing in the surrounding area; helping grow Connect Transit ridership 40 percent in just three years; and making Normal the second-busiest Amtrak station in the state.

Uptown Station's success is still playing out, giving Normal residents new mobility options via Amtrak, local transit and intercity bus service to 40 Midwest destinations, more than 30 miles of bicycle trail connections and high-speed rail service to Chicago and St. Louis.

Funded in part by a \$22 million Transportation Infrastructure Generating Economic Recovery (TIGER) grant under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA, the federal stimulus), the \$49 million Uptown Station was the first TIGER grant project to break ground and put workers on the job amidst a deep recession. Additional federal, state and local monies funded the work.

The thirteen Building Trades crafts that built Uptown Station include those who get the most work-hours when transportation dollars are used to build roads: the Laborers, Carpenters and Operating Engineers. But the Station also created a significant amount of work for Ironworkers, Electricians, Bricklayers, and Plumbers who usually don't benefit much from transportation infrastructure spending. Even niche specialties such as Sprinkler Fitters, Sheet Metal Workers, Cement Masons, and Painters benefited from the project.

Similarly, the \$220 million in private construction activity stimulated around the Station—which also benefited from a tax increment financing (TIF) district—created work for all the crafts because it involved a mix of commercial and residential buildings. The Station and most of the surrounding new large buildings conform to the U.S. Green Building Council's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) standards.

Normal's Uptown district was also an early adopter of LEED-ND, or Neighborhood Design, and achieved Silver designation. LEED-compliant construction required diverse construction skills. A portion of the Station's roof is covered in vegetation to reduce stormwater runoff and improve the thermal efficiency of the structure.

Electricians installed six electric vehicle charging stations and high-tech lighting systems. Electricians, Plumbers and Sheet Metal Workers installed high-efficiency heating and cooling systems. The site was previously a hazardous brownfield (used as both a gas station and dry cleaners) and required hazardous materials remediation. While, in this instance, the work was not performed by specially-trained Laborers, their worker training halls across the country frequently focus on hazardous brownfield remediation techniques. More LEED-standards spinoff-projects are already in the pipeline.

The Uptown Station project was shovel-ready for stimulus funding thanks to the Downtown Normal Redevelopment Plan that the town had formulated between 1999 and 2001 with the expertise of urban designer Douglas Farr. The plan emphasized sustainability, pedestrian- and transit-oriented design, increased housing density, mixed uses, and more diverse hotel and retail options. At its hub is the Uptown Station, a rail-bus-bike-parking hub facing a central roundabout connecting the street pattern. By the time the TIGER grant became available, Normal had created the TIF district to improve public amenities, required LEED standards on all new large public and private buildings in the district, rebranded the area Uptown Normal, and designed an eco-friendly traffic circle.

The Uptown TIF District is diverting property tax revenues to pay for land-assembly costs, public parking, public infrastructure (roads, plazas, and utilities), a children's museum, and other public improvements. Other nearby TIF districts and sales tax agreements will also provide modest subsidies to hotel and apartment projects. Although TIF has a contentious history in Illinois, the limited use of TIF in Uptown reinforces the long-term strategic redevelopment plan. Hopefully, Normal will "take its foot off the pedal" once Uptown's resurgence is firmly established by limiting the diversion of property tax and sales tax revenues into TIF districts.

The success of Uptown Station and Uptown Normal is helping the town reverse the ill effects of decades of sprawl. By helping attract jobs, residents and retail dollars back to the town, the Station is anchoring a comeback that has everything to do with giving people more mobility options. And thanks to the density and complexity of urban redevelopment, it is also creating lots of work for skilled Building Trades members.

Introduction

The birth of Uptown Station, a multi-modal transit center serving intercity bus, high-speed rail, intercity rail, bicycles, pedestrians, cars and public transit, represents a modern twist on Normal, Illinois' historical formula for economic success: public investment and careful attention to transportation assets.

Like many small- and medium-sized cities, Normal's urban core faced many challenges entering the new millennium. The growth of suburban strip malls drew retail spending away from downtown. Businesses came and went frequently. Those that remained tended to cater to the students at nearby Illinois State University. Buildings were poorly maintained, and the area generally lacked significant reinvestment. The area was not very appealing to cyclists and pedestrians. So in looking to develop a brighter future, the town harkened back to its past.

Originally named North Bloomington, Normal grew around the junction of the Illinois Central Railroad and the Chicago and Alton Railroad. The neighboring twin city of Bloomington was founded some thirty years earlier and both communities are surrounded by some of the most fertile agricultural land on the planet. In 1857, Illinois established a public institution dedicated to the education of teachers, known then as a normal school, and cities



around Illinois competed for the project. Bloomington's bid won, and Abraham Lincoln acted as bond counsel, helping arrange the construction financing for the future school.

As the Civil War came to a close, the town's identity had quickly merged with that of the university and it was renamed Normal, Illinois. But growth wouldn't really take off until the 1950s: As veterans returned home from the Second World War, many attending universities on GI Bill scholarships, Normal grew alongside the university. Between 1960 and 1970, the university was renamed Illinois State University (ISU), and Normal's total population nearly doubled. Growth continued, albeit more slowly throughout the 1980s and 1990s with little planning foresight between "town and gown." Today the town's population when the University is in session hovers around 54,000 residents, and Bloomington-Normal's combined populations are 129,000. Other anchor employers include the corporate

headquarters of State Farm Insurance and a Mitsubishi auto assembly plant.

As the town continued to grow into the new millennium, officials saw greater potential for the historic core. In 1999, the city hired Douglas Farr, a prominent urban designer, to study the central business district and help develop a cohesive vision for Normal's urban identity.¹ After gathering input from the public in over 70 meetings, considering traffic patterns, land use planning, and retail spending, Farr proposed a bold new framework called the Downtown Normal Redevelopment Plan, which was formally adopted by the council in 2001.

The plan emphasized sustainability, pedestrian- and transit-oriented design, increased housing density, mixed uses, and more diverse hotel and retail options.² These plan elements would be tied together with a central roundabout connecting the street pattern

to a multimodal transit hub, a significant improvement upon the existing Amtrak station. Over the next decade, Normal set to work by requiring that all public and private construction in the central business zoning district meet the U.S. Green Building Council's Leadership in Energy & Environmental Design (LEED) standards, rebranding the district Uptown Normal, creating a tax increment financing (TIF) district primarily to improve public amenities, designing an eco-friendly traffic circle, and refining the multimodal transit center concept.³

When Congress passed the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act in the depths of the 2009 recession, Transportation Infrastructure Generating Economic Recovery (TIGER) grants were created as a competitive grant program for transportation projects of all kinds. For the second time in a century and a half prior, Normal's bid proved captivating. Despite thousands of applicants, Uptown Station was selected as one of 51 first-round TIGER projects around the county. And it would be the first TIGER project in the country to break ground shortly after receiving the \$22 million TIGER grant. The project was also supported with \$6.7 million in Federal Transit Administration (FTA) 5309 Bus Funds, \$6.3 million in local funding from bonds, and \$1 million in state grants.⁴ Ultimately, the project ended up costing \$49 million with additional federal, state, and local funds.⁵



Building on History: A New Transit Nexus Unifying a New Urban Vision

Uptown Station sits atop the original intersection of the historic Illinois Central Railroad (long abandoned and converted in 1989 to the 30+-mile long Constitution Trail) and the Chicago and Alton Railroad, which still operates as a freight line and upon which Amtrak operates two trains. The Texas Eagle connects Chicago to St. Louis, Dallas, Austin, and San Antonio; the Lincoln Service follows the same route as far as St. Louis. Both trains serve Normal and the state capitol of Springfield.

The Bloomington-Normal Public Transit System, called Connect Transit, operates 11 bus routes. Uptown Station serves as

the central hub connecting these transit routes throughout the town. According to Connect Transit executive director Andrew Johnson, ridership has increased by over 40 percent in the last three years topping more than 2 million rides a year.⁶ This September, the agency won a \$2 million competitive federal DOT grant to help purchase eight new buses to meet growing demand. Local transit service also links at Uptown Station to intercity buses operated daily by Burlington Trailways and Peoria Charter connecting more than 40 cities throughout the Midwest. Normal's Bicycle and Pedestrian Master Plan also identifies non-motorized transportation



priorities. Over 30 miles of bicycle trails connect to Uptown Station. Sheltered bicycle parking is available inside next to the Connect Transit stop.

The Recovery Act also spurred investment in high-speed passenger rail service slated to connect Normal with both Chicago and St. Louis by 2017. Illinois received \$1.2 billion in federal stimulus dollars, which the state matched with \$400 million. Construction continues along Amtrak's fixed-guideway as workers continue replacing wooden ties with concrete ties and Normal readies itself with a pedestrian cross bridge over the tracks.

The Town of Normal even decided to occupy the top floors of Uptown Station, moving the primary town offices, the Town Council Chambers, and the Mayor's office.



Work for All the Crafts

Building Trades members in Central Illinois, like construction workers in much of the rest of the country, were hit hard by the Great Recession. In June of 2009 alone, the state lost 5,400 construction jobs –about twice the number of Illinois manufacturing jobs lost during the same period.⁷ With so many workers sitting on the bench, the TIGER grant stimulus and other sources of public investment served as a needed shot in the arm.

Construction at Uptown Station took two years; construction employment would peak from the second half of 2011 into the first half of 2012. At the time, Mayor Chris Koos estimated that the project would yield about 300 construction jobs. Years of planning made the project truly shovel-ready when federal funds came through at a time of extraordinary unemployment.

Such good news was not lost upon the industry. Mike Matejka, legislative affairs director for the Great Plains Laborer's District Council stated that, "We know how important 300 jobs are... the money [spent building the Uptown Station] goes back into our economy."⁸

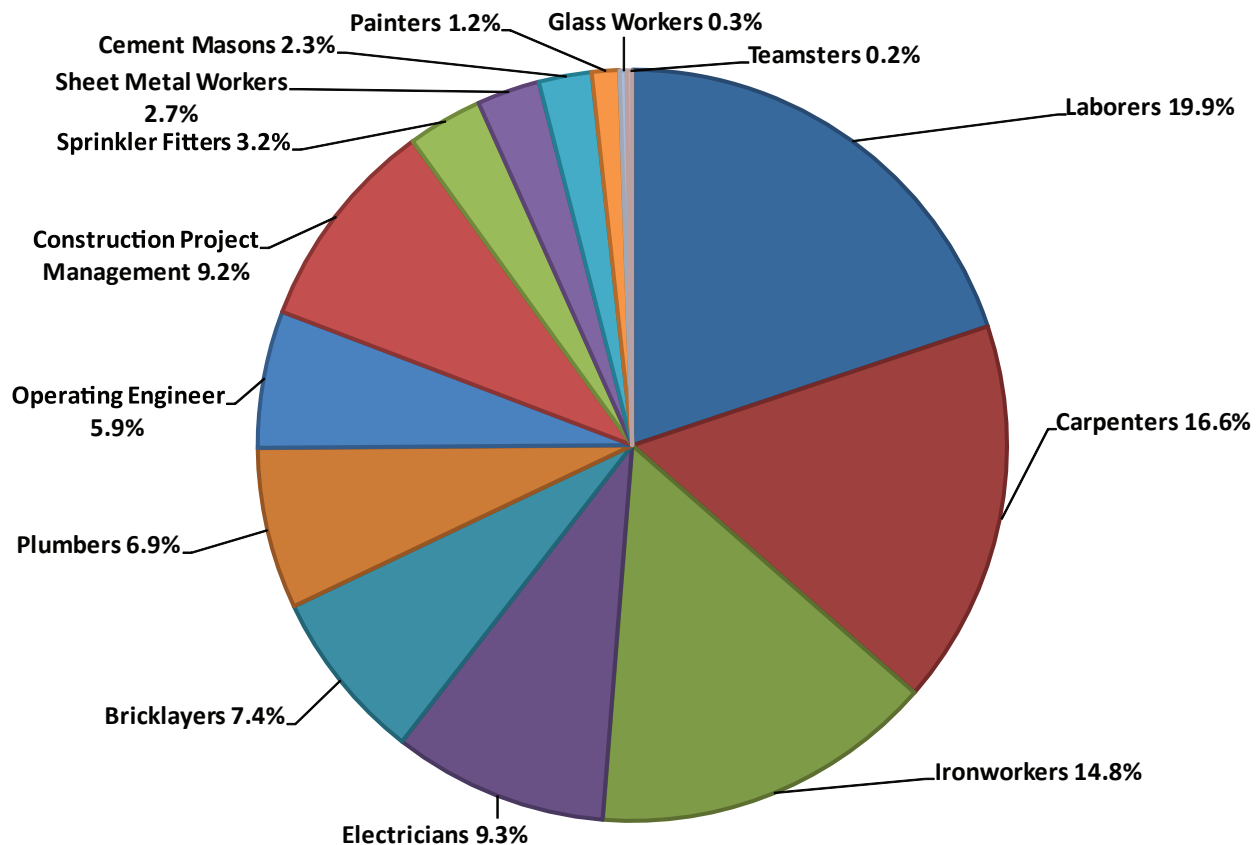
An analysis of data from the Town of Normal and the federal Recovery Act website reveals that Building Trades members of at least 13 different construction crafts benefitted from the

project. In total, an estimated 139,849 construction craft hours were logged on the project. Although the project was mostly the construction of a building, the traditional road-building crafts still benefitted heavily from the project: more than 42 percent of the work was performed by Laborers, Carpenters, and Operating Engineers. Many other crafts also benefited: Ironworkers, Electricians, Bricklayers, and Plumbers who usually don't see much work from federal transportation spending, also received

significant work, accounting for another 38 percent of the work completed. Even crafts with niche specialties such as Sprinkler Fitters, Sheet Metal Workers, Cement Masons, and Painters benefited from the project.

In following through with the 2001 redevelopment plan's implementation strategy, not only did the town update its zoning ordinance to require all new construction of greater than 7,500 square feet at ground level achieve a LEED

Estimated Hours by Craft on Uptown Station Project



Source: Good Jobs First analysis of Town of Normal & federal Recovery Act contractor and sub-contractor data.

certification, but Normal's Uptown neighborhood was also an early adopter of LEED-ND, or Neighborhood Design, and it achieved Silver designation.⁹ Numerous sustainable urban design approaches were recognized in Uptown's LEED-ND certification: brownfield redevelopment, attention to transportation choices, and stormwater efficient infrastructure.

Uptown Station's LEED Silver construction required a diverse array of skilled construction crafts to meet the challenge.¹⁰ For instance, a portion of the building's roof is actually covered in vegetation to absorb stormwater runoff and enhance the thermal efficiency of the structure. Electricians installed six electric vehicle charging stations and high-tech lighting systems. Plumbers and Sheet Metal Workers installed high-efficiency heating and cooling systems. The site itself was previously a hazardous brownfield (used as both a gas station and dry cleaners) and required hazardous materials remediation typically performed by specially-trained Laborers.¹¹

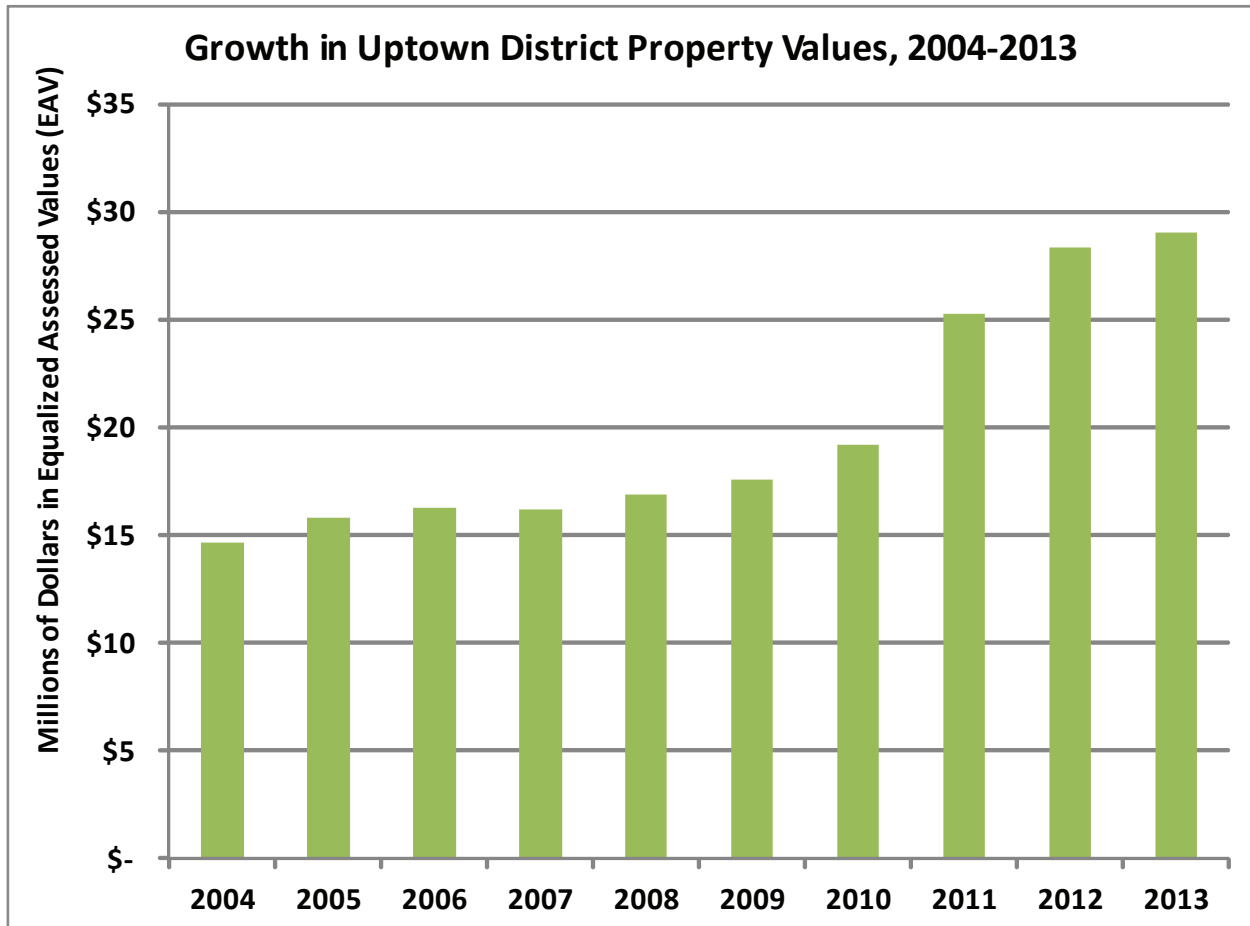
Similar types of construction skills will be needed as the town continues to fulfill the vision laid out in the 2001 plan. More LEED-quality spinoff-projects are already in the pipeline.



Spurring Spinoff Development Projects

Uptown Station anchors the 2001 revitalization plan's vision. Aside from providing a visual focal point to the district with its timeless clock tower, it physically ties together numerous transit modes that were previously not integrated seamlessly into the urban form – these modes now join within a pedestrian friendly traffic circle. Buses easily alight with an enhanced traffic pattern tied together with urban greenspace capturing excess stormwater runoff within the circle. Through intentional public investment in attractive transportation infrastructure, the seeds have been sewn for private reinvestment.

Also boosting infrastructure in the Uptown District is a Tax Increment Financing (or TIF) District surrounding the station and



nearby properties that will divert some property tax revenues through 2026 to pay for property assembly costs, public parking attached to and nearby the Uptown Station, public infrastructure such as roads, plazas, and utilities, a children’s museum, professional planning services, a small amount of grants and loans, and other public improvements.¹² Nearby TIF districts and sales tax agreements will also provide modest subsidies to hotel and apartment projects.¹³

While Good Jobs First frequently

expresses skepticism towards TIF, the use of limited TIF spending in Uptown as a part of a long-term strategic redevelopment plan stands apart. Tying TIF spending to public infrastructure investments and transit-oriented development aligns with many best practices. Over time, the key to utilizing TIF is making cost-effective investments while limiting the budgetary impact on key public services such as public safety and education. It will also be important to “take the foot off the pedal” once Uptown Normal’s resurgence is firmly established so that the private sector

does not become overly reliant on public sector subsidies. Limiting the use of TIF after revitalization has taken place is a Good Jobs First best practice. Broadly, it appears that Normal possesses a healthy debate about the use of TIF, something too frequently absent from economic development efforts.

The data collected by the Uptown TIF District also allows for a clearer picture about the impact of the Uptown Station project. While it's difficult to necessarily separate individual projects in the District, it's evident that that Uptown Station's opening helped stimulate local growth. As we show below, Equalized Assessed Values in the TIF district rose sharply as the construction of the Uptown Station launched in 2011.¹⁴ Since 2004 when the TIF district was created, the Uptown area has attracted some \$220 million in private investment.

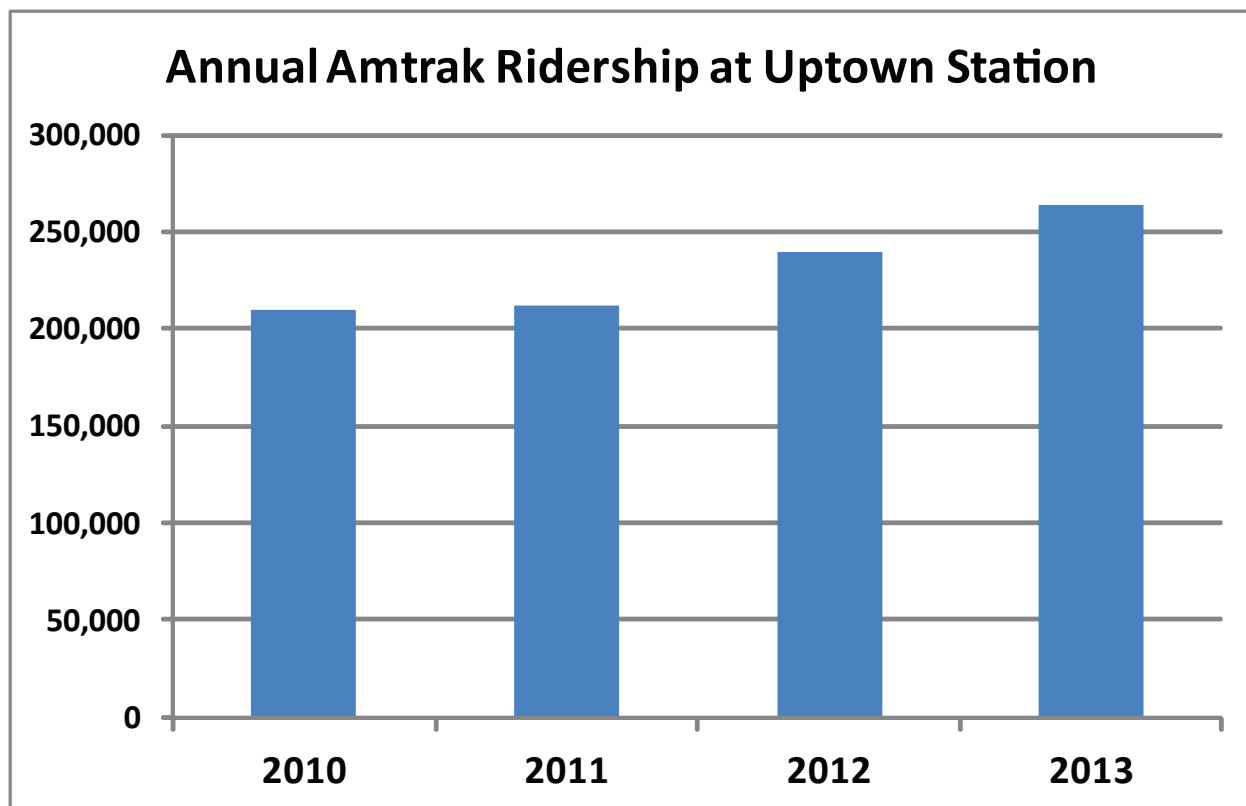
Other construction projects that should also create work for many crafts are in the development pipeline, though not without a few snags along the way. Ground has already broken on the \$32 million Uptown Circle hotel project, but only after one developer's plan fell through. The planned eight-story Hyatt Hotel project, which will bring additional hotel rooms to complement the Marriott convention center across the street and help attract fine dining in an additional development phase, is now moving forward.¹⁵ As the IBEW's

own trade publication notes, the Hyatt project will mean jobs lasting months for Local 197 members.¹⁶ Nearby apartment buildings too are undergoing reinvestment and renovations.¹⁷

Amtrak Ridership is also growing, meaning more passengers in close proximity to Uptown Normal more likely to spend in the local economy. Today, Uptown Station is Illinois' second busiest Amtrak station in the state and the fourth busiest in the Midwest, behind only Chicago, St. Louis, and Milwaukee (and ahead of Springfield, Indianapolis, Minneapolis-St. Paul, and Kansas City, the three latter being far larger cities).¹⁸ Normal's rise in ridership seems to go hand in hand with the new station: ridership grew nearly two percent year over year for the first five months of operation in 2013.¹⁹ As Amtrak spokesperson Marc Magliari explained, "The nicer the station, the more services at the station, the more attractive riding the Amtrak train is. And there's certainly a very, very attractive station right now in Uptown Normal."²⁰

Conclusion

For cities around the country facing revitalization challenges like Normal, Illinois, federal spending through TIGER grants and Federal Transit Administration assistance stand to stimulate diverse construction job creation. With prospects



dim for greater federal support for transportation, cities will need to prioritize high rate-of-return investments. Though it took nearly a decade for Normal's Uptown Station to receive federal funds, support quickly rallied around the multi-modal transit project from officials, business leaders, labor unions, and civic organizations of all persuasions: a rarity in today's polarized political atmosphere. Even politicians of opposing parties rallied behind the project!²¹

Testifying on Capitol Hill in winter 2014 amidst another icy transportation reauthorization debate, Normal Mayor Chris Koos emphasized the need for

the federal government to partner with localities. "Local governments are simply not equipped to take on these major transportation initiatives by themselves. Strong and consistent federal support, in partnership with state and local investment and in partnership with the private sector is essential to effectively addressing our nation's transportation infrastructure needs," he said.²² (Mayor Koos owns a bike store and a runners' clothing shop.)²³

With such diverse construction craft job creation potential, Uptown Station shines as an example of 21st century economic development done right and a model for transportation investment.

Notes

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