

Table is set for special session

By Doug Loon, Minnesota Chamber of Commerce President

Minnesotans have been delivered the disappointing news: "Special session talks are dead." For months, we watched as Governor Dayton and legislative leaders tried to negotiate a special session to finish the work of the regular session — to pass bipartisan tax and bonding bills that included transportation improvements, addressing another priority of the 2016 session.

Despite everyone's best intentions, talks bogged down over one issue. As one headline underscored: "Funding for Southwest killed special session."

While the Southwest Light Rail Transit may have killed a special session, we now know that the lack of a special session didn't kill SWLRT. At the urging of the governor, the Metropolitan Council, Counties Transit Improvement Board and Hennepin County took steps to move SWLRT outside of the legislative process — not only keeping it alive, but ensuring it will be built, barring successful legal challenges.

The recent move to fund the SWLRT by bypassing the Legislature should pave the way for a special session to take care of unfinished business to the benefit of all Minnesotans. We're not alone in resurrecting hope of a special session. With SWLRT out of the picture, Dayton himself raised the possibility of convening lawmakers during a State Fair interview.

The path is clear for quick action on tax relief for Minnesotans, including many small businesses and farmers, and long-term investment in transportation — top priorities of the Minnesota Chamber and Chamber Federation that are also important for Minnesota families and communities.

We urge Dayton and legislative leaders to commit to:

- An immediate special session to pass the tax and bonding bills. Nearly 90 percent of legislators supported the tax bill that was pocket-vetoed by the governor. The tax bill provides needed tax relief and assistance to many taxpayers and local governments. Likewise, the bonding bill, which was stranded in the final hours of the session also due to disagreement about SWLRT, would provide funding for much needed infrastructure and transportation projects in communities throughout the state. The sole focus of the special session should be the bonding bill as passed by the House and the tax bill with its needed technical fix.
- Quick, bipartisan passage of a comprehensive, long-term, statewide funding package for roads, bridges and transit in the 2017 Legislature. With SWLRT off the table, agreement should be within reach given the bipartisan consensus for increased investment in our state's multimodal transportation infrastructure.

Our political leaders should agree to both actions. This is an election year, providing us all with an opportunity to challenge legislators to get the job done. Failure to do so simply places more pressure on already overburdened taxpayers on the local level while state coffers bulge.

SWLRT —which "killed the special session" — is now very much alive. We encourage the governor and legislative leaders to engineer a similar revival in the special session to provide tax

relief, bonding dollars and transportation funding for the good of all Minnesota. Let's raise our voices together and demand that we be heard. The time for action is now!

Dakota County Regional Chamber of Commerce is a member of the Minnesota Chamber Federation, and endorses the opinions expressed by Doug Loon in this commentary.