Don't play legislative games with state bonding bill

Public infrastructure projects deserve Legislature’s attention this year.

By Editorial Board, Star Tribune
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Real beds, complete with mattresses and bedding that’s laundered each week, have replaced thin mats on a cold floor at Dorothy Day Center’s homeless shelter in St. Paul. Bathrooms that afford privacy, lockers that protect possessions, a waiting area out of the cold, windows that let natural light do its healing work — there’s a lot that has improved on the east metro campus where down-and-out Minnesotans long have come when they have nowhere else to go.

Yet despite those upgrades, the three-month-old Higher Ground housing facility isn’t sufficient, Catholic Charities CEO Tim Marx explains. Ending chronic homelessness, long a state policy goal, will require more than providing clean beds and hot meals. It will take the services — job training, physical and mental health care, financial counseling, veterans’ assistance — and permanent housing planned for a second, adjacent building, the Opportunity Center and Dorothy Day Residence.

Getting that building built — as well as many other needed public facilities around the state — will take a major bonding bill, enacted this year. Dorothy Day can’t wait. It will risk losing $5 million in federal tax credits and an untold number of private donations if the public part of a promised public-private partnership proves — again — to be unreliable. It’s seeking $12 million in general obligation bonds and $15 million in housing infrastructure bonds for a project whose total cost exceeds $60 million.

With four weeks left in the 2017 regular session, Dorothy Day supporters aren’t the only Minnesotans who are nervously eyeing the legislative calendar in anticipation of a bonding bill that’s already almost a year overdue. Metro Transit planners urgently need $12 million to complete the planned Orange Line bus rapid transit line along Interstate 35W. The Minnesota Historical Society is pleading for go-ahead funding for a new visitor center at Historic Fort Snelling in time for the 2020 bicentennial of modern Minnesota’s birthplace.

And around the state, people are looking to the state to be a reliable partner once more in upgrading water-treatment plants, building flood-mitigation infrastructure, shoring up aging bridges, and providing the college and university classrooms and laboratories that will prepare Minnesota’s future workforce.

Some legislators think of the bonding bill as lawmaking “dessert” — the reward that leadership bestows for obeisance at a session’s end. Others fancy it as a bargaining chip, something so desired by a DFL governor that he would sign a fiscally risky tax cut into law to get it. Senate Majority Leader Paul Gazelka said last week that he considers the tax bill and a bonding bill “intertwined.”

Both of those notions deserve to be debunked. Bonding isn’t for niceties. It pays for the meat-and-potatoes of government — sewers, roads, jails, schools, and second chances for the homeless. It’s too important to be held hostage in an attempt to persuade Gov. Mark Dayton to sign a tax bill that could not win his signature on its own. That ploy could result in another empty-handed finish.

It was disheartening last year to watch a $1 billion bonding bill die when House Republicans refused to accept a DFL Senate plan to allow Hennepin County to pay for a larger share of Southwest light-rail transit. We had hoped embarrassment over that failure would quash legislative desire to play partisan games this year with a bill that, by constitutional design, must win supermajority support to be sent to the governor. But inaction to date in the House — where bonding bills must originate — has us worried.

A decent $973 million bill sponsored by GOP Sen. David Senjem of Rochester has cleared Senate committees and awaits a floor vote. A strikingly similar bill has been introduced in the House by DFL minority lead on bonding, Rep. Alice Hausman of St. Paul. Both include funding for the Dorothy Day Opportunity Center and the other urgencies on what is by now a familiar list. We’re rooting for something akin to the Senjem/Hausman bills to surface in the House Capital Investment Committee, very soon.