

## **Railroad projects gain steam across Chicago area**

### **New state money injects hope into slow-moving plan**

By Richard Wronski Tribune reporter

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A motorist often needs two hours to travel from one end of the Chicago area to the other, but it can take two days for a freight train, slowed by a bewildering, century-old maze of tracks and outdated signals and switches.

So transportation officials were heartened when the Illinois legislature recently set aside \$320 million for rail improvements, hoping it would help unlock train gridlock in **Chicago** -- the nation's biggest, busiest and most congested railroad hub.

The infusion of state dollars is expected to leverage additional millions in federal matching funds -- money that would build new crossings and overpasses, which could mean faster commutes for **Metra** and Amtrak riders as well as for long-suffering drivers now stuck waiting at blocked intersections.

Six of Metra's 11 lines operate on freight-owned tracks, and delays between passenger and freight trains regularly cause commuters to be late for work and dinner. Such encounters long have been part of the urban experience in a metropolitan area where each day as many as 500 freight and 800 passenger trains pass through a labyrinth of tracks and crossings.

The new state money will fund a program called Chicago Region Environmental and Transportation Efficiency, or CREATE, a unique public-private partnership set up in 2003 to untangle the city's notorious rail congestion.

Aiming to make the system work better, CREATE's partners -- local, state and federal transportation officials, along with Metra, Amtrak and the nation's freight railroads -- compiled a list of 78 improvement projects.

These include 25 rail-highway overpasses; six new rail-over-rail "flyovers" to separate freight and passenger train tracks; and other signal and track improvements.

All are designed to improve train speeds within Chicago, from an average of 9 m.p.h. to 15 m.p.h.

"That doesn't sound too fast, but it's a considerable improvement," said Jim LaBelle, a transportation expert with the civic group Chicago Metropolis 2020 and a Metra board member.

So far, only five of its first-phase projects have been completed. The program is jointly funded by the railroads, City of Chicago, and state and federal governments.

CREATE originally was estimated to cost \$1.5 billion, but some experts now put the price tag closer to \$3 billion.

The rail network it was meant to improve dates to the 19th Century, when many railroads were competing. Back then, railroads "worried less about connecting with each other than competing with each other," LaBelle said.

The new state money -- it was contained in a capital bill -- is the largest single amount targeted for CREATE and gives the program new momentum, said Edward Hamberger, president of the American Association of Railroads, one of CREATE's partners.

"These projects are shovel-ready and we're ready to put people to work," Hamberger said. "The fact that the governor and the legislature reached agreement on the capital bill money is just perfect timing."

Not earmarked yet for any specific project, the state money will be the basis for obtaining matching federal funds.

U.S. Rep. Dan Lipinski (D-Ill.), who obtained a \$100 million earmark in federal funding for CREATE in 2005, said the state money is vital in securing more federal dollars.

Lipinski is seeking \$700 million for the program in a new transportation authorization bill before [the U.S.](#) House. The chairman of the House Transportation Committee, Rep. James Oberstar (D-Minn.), has toured CREATE projects and is a strong ally, Lipinski said.

"CREATE stands out as having real national significance," Lipinski said.

One key project is a rail crossing near 63rd Street and the Dan Ryan

Expressway, where the Rock Island Metra line intersects the **Norfolk Southern** Railroad tracks. It would untangle freight, Amtrak and Metra service, officials said.

The plan calls for construction of a flyover that would carry the Rock Island line over the Norfolk Southern tracks.