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### Late for work? Blame freight and truck traffic

Trucks and freight trains compete with commuters for space on our highways and railroads, and they are winning. The daily commute in the Chicago area is getting longer and longer — the second-longest in the nation in travel time — largely because of increased freight traffic.

Congestion costs the Chicago region \$11 billion annually in delays, fuel, productivity, environmental risk, safety hazards and unreliable deliveries, according to the U.S. Department of Transportation.

Truck traffic is proliferating because of increased global trade, just-in-time distribution and smaller, more frequent shipments. Our research at the Urban Transportation Center shows that the biggest increase in vehicle-miles traveled on our region's roadways comes from trucks and traffic from outside the region — just passing through.

Add to that ocean containers being trucked across the region (Chicago trails only Hong Kong, Singapore and Shanghai in container handling), and it's no wonder our commute takes longer.

Freight trains compete with commuter trains, as well. Chicago, America's railroad hub since the 19th century, handles roughly one-third of the nation's freight as it originates, terminates or passes through the metro area. Metra reports that freight interference is a major reason commuter trains are late. Rail congestion increases the conflict between trains carrying passengers and those carrying freight, as evidenced by the recent Amtrak collision with a freight train.

And why do so many trains block highway grade crossings, seemingly forever, delaying cars, buses and emergency vehicles as the train either stops or crawls along at a snail's pace? Because the railyards are clogged with freight, causing backups.

Partial solutions are possible. One example: rush-hour pricing for commercial vehicles, like the variable truck tolls on the Illinois tollway.

A more comprehensive solution is the Create program, designed and partially funded by the city, state, Metra and freight railroads to move trains more efficiently. Create — or Chicago Regional Environmental and Transportation Efficiency — would get rid of bottlenecks and



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streamline the handling of freight and passenger trains by eliminating highway grade crossings, upgrading track and signals and building "flyovers" at heavily used rail junctions.

But the \$1.5-billion program received only \$100 million in the 2005 federal transportation funding bill. This shortfall means the region will suffer through more and worse congestion.

Since freight, like public transit, affects all of us, businesses and the public should urge the Illinois delegation to lobby Washington for additional federal funds and the General Assembly in Springfield for adequate resources for Create in the state's capital program.