

CREATE project slated for \$100M from feds for railroad fix

By: [Paul Merrion](#) Feb. 16, 2010

(Crain's) — A Chicago-area plan to fix railroad bottlenecks will get a \$100-million boost from a new round of federal stimulus grants to be awarded Wednesday, according to a source briefed on the matter.

A substantial grant means continued progress for the Chicago Region Environmental and Transportation Efficiency program, known as Create, a partnership of freight railroads, Amtrak, [Metra](#), and state and local transportation agencies.

Illinois transportation officials applied for \$300 million, the maximum any state could get. But there were more than 1,400 requests totaling \$56 billion that were chasing the \$1.5 billion set aside in the stimulus program for nationally significant transportation infrastructure projects.

By law, grants had to be equitably distributed to all parts of the country and both urban and rural communities.

Create is a series of rail and highway crossing improvements designed to substantially reduce both rail and highway commuting delays in the Chicago area and reduce the time it takes for rail freight to move through the nation's transportation hub.

The long-range plan, which identified more than \$2.5 billion worth of overpasses, underpasses, track and signal improvements and other projects, is nearing completion of the first few projects that got under way in 2006.

"We have momentum going," said Michael Payette, vice-president of government affairs for Union Pacific Corp., one of Create's partners. But now "we are running out of money, so if we don't get this money, we'll basically have to stop the project."

Create was launched with \$100 million in federal funds from the last major federal transportation bill, in 2005, and earlier this month it received \$133 million in federal high-speed rail funding for one of its most important projects, a railroad bridge on the South Side called the Englewood Flyover. In addition, the railroad industry is contributing about \$200 million and Illinois is putting in about \$300 million.

The federal stimulus program set aside \$1.5 billion for the Transportation Department to dole out grants for projects with national or regional significance, called Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery — or Tiger — discretionary grants. No single project can get more than \$300 million and no state can get more than 20% of the \$1.5 billion.

Locally, the Illinois Department of Transportation sought a \$300-million Tiger grant for 16 projects on Create's agenda, primarily track improvements and rail-highway grade separations on the South and Southwest sides of Chicago. By law, the projects must be completed in two years to qualify for the grant. If awarded, the grant would create almost 4,500 jobs, the state said in its application.

IDOT is already gearing up for more work, with plans under way to hire a consulting firm to act as Create's project manager for the next three years — a decision that's also scheduled to be announced Wednesday.

An IDOT spokeswoman did not have an immediate comment.

When completed, the projects would reduce train delays by 17,684 hours a year and save shippers \$265 million, according to the state's application. The state also said the improvements would reduce commuting delays by 57,631 passenger-hours a year and reduce delays for motorists by almost 345,000 hours annually.

"This funding will allow CREATE to continue untangling the knots in the Chicago region's passenger and freight rail system," Rep. Dan Lipinski, D-Chicago, said in a statement. "It will help create jobs, shorten commutes, reduce shipping times, lower fuel usage and pollution, make high-speed rail a reality, and cement our region's position as America's transportation hub."