

Indiana Economic Digest

Chicago rail plan ready to chug

BY KEITH BENMAN, Times of Northwest Indiana
kbenman@nwtimes.com

The long-delayed \$1.5 billion CREATE plan to reduce rail congestion in the greater Chicago area will start rolling this year with five initial projects.

The U.S. Department of Transportation this week released \$25 million in CREATE funding secured under the 2005 Federal transportation act, Earl Wacker of CSX Transportation, told the Northwest Indiana Intermodal Task Force on Friday.

Though there are no specific CREATE projects in Northwest Indiana, it will have a big impact on rail congestion here, Wacker and others said.

CREATE stands for Chicago Region Environmental and Transportation Efficiency. It is one of three projects of "national and regional significance" in Illinois receiving funding under the Federal transportation act.

"If we're going to have meaningful intermodal development in Northwest Indiana, we need access to Western railroads. So CREATE is critical to making all that work," said Henry Lampe, president of the Chicago SouthShore & South Bend Railroad.

Rail congestion in Chicago often backs up rail traffic in Northwest Indiana, leaving trains parked on tracks, sidings and crossings.

The intermodal task force is undertaking a short-range freight study to identify infrastructure improvements to ease freight congestion in Northwest Indiana. It could lead to a CREATE-like plan in the region.

The \$25 million from the U.S. Department of Transportation is the first money to flow to CREATE from a \$100 million earmark for the project. The rest of the money will come in installments in the next three years.

The Federal money will leverage \$100 million in funding from five major railroads – Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway, Canadian Pacific Railway, CSX Transportation, Norfolk Southern Corp. and Union Pacific Railroad.

It will also leverage \$30 million from the city of Chicago. The Illinois Department of Transportation will kick in \$100 million more. The IDOT portion still needs legislative approval.

The CREATE plan suffered a blow last year when Canadian Northern withdrew from the project. The year before, funding in the Federal transportation act fell well below the \$500 million CREATE expected.

But delays are over, and the project is now ready to go, Wacker said Friday. Reconstruction of the McCook connection, where two freight tracks cross Metra's Heritage Corridor, will be one of the first projects. The reconstruction will allow freight trains to negotiate the connection at 2.5 times their current speed.

When total build-out is completed, in perhaps a decade, CREATE will have built 25 new roadway overpasses where auto and pedestrian traffic currently cross rail tracks at grade level. Six new underpasses or overpasses will be built to separate freight and passenger lines.

Article © Copyright © 1996-2007 nwtimes.com.