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Railroad Advocates Head To Springfield In Hopes Of Additional Funding

CHICAGO (WBBM) -- A special trainload of railroad and local officials, and representatives from a number of advocacy groups left Union Station for Springfield Wednesday to lobby for \$100 million in state infrastructure money.

WBBM's Bob Roberts reports.

The money would be the local share for the first phase of an ambitious, \$1.5 billion plan to speed Metra and freight trains on their way and eliminate blocked rail crossings.

The nation's railroads believe enough in the Chicago Region Environment and Transportation Efficiency Program, known as "CREATE," that they have kicked in more than \$100 million of their own money to get it going. The federal government, in the surface transportation bill approved in 2005, approved more than \$100 million. Now, those on the train say, it's the state's turn to make a similar contribution.

The money would be part of any infrastructure program approved this spring in Springfield. It's a plan that already is expected to include money for highways, mass transit, school construction and other critical infrastructure.

Mayor Daley's acting Transportation Commissioner, Sheri Heramb (HAIR'-um), said CREATE's potential stretches far beyond the freight railroads if fully implemented.

"We're likely to see an increase in jobs to the tune of 17,000 additional jobs," she said.

The jobs would be concentrated in transportation industries.

The executive director of the Illinois Chamber of Commerce Infrastructure Council, Jack Bernhardt, said it would "unclog" rail lines, get commuters to and from work on time, put overpasses where key rail crossings now exist, and eliminate bottlenecks on lines that desperately need modernization.

"Much of the technology that's still in place in the city of Chicago was developed when Ulysses S.

Grant was President," he said.

The Civil War general served as President between 1869 and 1877.

In far south suburban Crete, Village President Mike Einhorn sees the congestion each day on a line used by both Union Pacific and CSX freight trains.

"The line...is largely a parking lot, with trains waiting to get into the city or waiting to get through the city," he said.

Einhorn said all that diesel exhaust fouls the air in Crete, 30 miles from downtown Chicago. But he said the commuter rail line Metra plans with Crete as its terminus, the SouthEast service, will never succeed unless the freight train gridlock is unclogged.

"We need to be fluid in Chicago and we're not fluid in Chicago right now," Einhorn said.

In Franklin Park, where city officials this summer plan to open an underpass that will eliminate traffic blockages for more than 4,000 cars a day on Grand Avenue, Mayor Dan Pritchett is sold on CREATE.

"We want to show graphically if you build something like this what it can do to your community and the quality of life in that community," Pritchett said.

With three rail yards in or on the edges of Franklin Park, and trains backed up trying to get into them, Pritchett said more financial help is needed for additional underpasses.

Midwest High-Speed Rail Coalition President Rick Harnish said he believes all types of transportation would benefit.

"The faster you can get freight trains through Chicago, the more dependably passenger trains can get in and out of the city as well," he said.

Metra is a member of the CREATE coalition and supports its efforts to obtain funding.

The railroads think enough of the effort to have contributed the train to the lobbying effort. Union Pacific Railroad contributed six cars, Canadian National Railways and CSX Transportation one car apiece, and Amtrak the two locomotives.

The lobbyists will testify Thursday before the Illinois House Rail Industry Committee, chaired by State Rep. Elaine Nekritz (D-Northbrook) and will speak with a number of key legislators. They return to Chicago Thursday night.