

Stadium-goers to get benefit of stimulus funds to unclog rail congestion

Thursday, February 18, 2010

Railway Track & Structures

The \$100-million federal grant awarded to the Chicago region Feb. 17 to unclog rail congestion will benefit Jimmy Buffett Parrotheads and Chicago Fire soccer aficionados along with freight haulers, motorists and rail passengers, the *Chicago Tribune* reports. That's because \$20 million of that money will go toward building a rail/highway underpass on 71st Street, west of Harlem Avenue and across from Bridgeview's Toyota Park, a 28,000-seat sports and music venue.

The underpass is one of five Chicago-area rail projects receiving part of \$1.5 billion in Obama administration stimulus money designed to spur the economy, develop infrastructure and create jobs.

The rail projects are lumped together under a rail congestion relief program known as the Chicago Region Environmental and Transportation Efficiency program, or CREATE, a partnership of railroads and transportation agencies. With the strong support of state and federal officials, particularly CREATE's chief proponent, U.S. Rep. Dan Lipinski, D-Ill., the rail program beat out scores of other agencies for stimulus money.

The Illinois Tollway unsuccessfully sought \$300 million to help build an interchange where Interstate Highway 57 and the Tri-State Tollway (Interstate Highway 294) intersect. The tollway also lost out in its bid for \$38 million to set up a Dial-511 traffic and travel information system. The tollway and Pace had partnered on a losing \$200 million proposal for Tri-State express buses.

Observers said Wednesday that the CREATE program had the edge on the other applicants from the start.

"I am surprised that CREATE didn't get more," said Jim LaBelle, a transportation expert with the civic group Chicago Metropolis 2020 and a Metra director.

Peter Skosey of the Metropolitan Planning Council said the Illinois Department of Transportation, one of the CREATE partners, "put all its eggs in one basket" with the rail program. "IDOT tried to corral everybody around CREATE," Skosey said.

That's not to say CREATE didn't merit the money, the experts said, since Chicago is the largest U.S. rail freight chokepoint, handling one-fourth of the nation's rail traffic.

Another CREATE project, the construction of new tracks and a bridge on the Union Pacific line in the western suburbs, will aid Metra passengers by speeding freight trains. Fifty-nine Metra trains a day with more than 30,000 passengers a day move through the area.

"That work will get some of the freight trains out of the way of commuter trains," Metra spokesman Michael Gillis said.

Bridgeview officials have long sought a vehicle underpass below four sets of tracks near Toyota Park, built in 2006. Trains cause 31 daily hours of motorist delays, transportation officials said, and traffic woes are exacerbated during soccer matches or concerts.

Lipinski said CREATE projects, including the underpass, had an advantage because they are "shovel-ready." Work can start this year and be done in 2012.

Nationally, the CREATE program's \$100 million was the second-largest single award among 51 projects that were given funding Feb. 17 by U.S. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood, a former Illinois congressman.

Also receiving funding in Illinois were the Tri-City Port District in Granite City, \$6 million, and the Normal multimodal transportation facility, which received \$22 million.

"I believe if you look at major projects that need to be done across the country, CREATE is definitely in the top three," Lipinski said. "Chicago is the rail hub of North America."