

Federal stimulus spending boosts 'Create' rail fix, but much of the \$3-bil. plan is still unfunded

By: [Paul Merrion](#) March 08, 2010

(Crain's) -Chicago's comprehensive plan to eliminate bottlenecks where freight and passenger railroads intersect is at a crossroads of its own.

Propelled by \$233 million in federal stimulus funding, several long-planned projects are now moving ahead, including the first two of several massive construction jobs needed to separate rail lines that crisscross at ground level.

It's a significant milestone, renewing momentum for the Chicago Region Environmental and Transportation Efficiency, or Create, partnership.

But it's unclear where the state, city and nation's railroads are going to get at least \$2.5 billion more needed for dozens of other projects now planned to expedite rail traffic throughout the region.

"Doing one or two isn't where the prize is," says Jeffrey Sriver, Create program manager at the Chicago Department of Transportation. "You get the big bang when you complete the whole network."

With six major freight railroads converging here — plus hundreds of Amtrak and Metra commuter trains sharing the same tracks every day — it can take 48 hours to move a rail car from Los Angeles to Chicago and another 30 hours to move it from one side of the city to the other. During rush hour, freight trains must wait for commuter lines to pass. Routes dating to the mid-19th century were never designed for today's rail traffic volume, let alone the surge expected in decades to come.

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One newly funded project, a \$133-million rail bridge called the Englewood Flyover, will separate heavily used freight and passenger lines on the South Side, virtually eliminating delays for more than 100 freight trains on that route every day.

"The pieces are beginning to fall together," says Hugh Kiley Jr., assistant vice-president of operations at Norfolk Southern Corp. and a leader of the Create project since its inception. "We all see the light at the end of the tunnel now."

But Create's real efficiencies depend on several other big flyover projects still on the drawing board, plus dozens of smaller improvements.



"If you clear the blockage but you don't clear the blockage at the next curve, you haven't accomplished much," says Dan Grewe, director of the Chicago Transportation Coordination Office, a systemwide control center run by the region's railroads. "We're early in the game yet."

At every level, however, Create's future funding is in flux. It's unclear when Congress will tackle another big surface transportation bill or whether Chicago can do better than the \$100-million earmark for Create in the last transportation bill five years ago.

"If not No. 1, it's in the top three of projects important to the nation in transportation" that will be targeted for funding, says Rep. Dan Lipinski, D-Chicago, a member of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee. "How much that is remains to be determined."

Create's original \$232 million in funding, which came mostly from the railroads and the 2005 federal transportation bill, has largely been spent on studies, design work and 10 relatively small modernization projects, now completed.

The state also put in \$10 million, and it's committed to spend another \$400 million from the \$31-billion capital construction program enacted last year. But the state's fiscal crisis and the lack of a clear funding source for infrastructure borrowing puts that in doubt.

The railroads put in half of the \$232 million they collectively committed to Create, but the other half has to be renegotiated.

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Create's five-year-old game plan changed significantly last year when Canadian National Railway acquired the Elgin Joliet & Eastern Railway, giving CN a faster outlying route around Chicago's congestion. That meant seven of the original Create projects were no longer needed, eliminating CN's \$63-million share, more than a fourth of the rail industry's commitment, according to a CN spokesman.

The remaining railroads are still committed to paying their shares, but not CN's. "We haven't come up with a new number," Norfolk Southern's Mr. Kiley says.

Railroads are reassessing the benefits they will get out of Create and its next priorities.

"So far, the projects completed have been related to modernization," such as track and signal improvements, says a spokeswoman for the Washington, D.C.-based Assn. of American Railroads. "Now, we're looking toward the big earth-moving kind of projects that will help separate freight from passenger rail in a significant way."

Autos wait as
a freight train
crosses 25th
Street in west
suburban
Melrose Park.

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At the same time, better cost estimates last year revised the total price tag for Create to \$3 billion, double what it originally was in 2005, even after eliminating the six CN projects. That puts pressure on the rest of the railroads to kick in more than their original commitment.

"It would be prudent for all partners to think about ways to keep the project moving," says George Weber, chief of the Bureau of Railroads at the Illinois Department of Transportation.

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