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Rail-crossing separation project to start in Bridgeview

By [Jon Hilkevitch](#), Tribune reporter

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A groundbreaking ceremony will be held Monday on a project to tunnel a road underneath railroad tracks near the Toyota Park stadium in Bridgeview where about 80 slow-moving freight trains a day cause severe traffic backups, officials said.

The vehicle underpass separating tracks from 71st Street near Harlem Avenue in the south suburb is being built as part of a regional program, called CREATE, to improve the flow of freight and passenger trains through the Chicago area while easing traffic congestion and the air pollution it causes and enhancing safety on roads that intersect the tracks.

The 71st Street project involves separating four CSX and Indiana Harbor Belt rail tracks, officials said. The rail crossing is just west of the 20,000-seat Toyota Park, and 71st Street is used to enter and exit stadium parking lots.

Construction is set to begin in July, according to the Illinois Department of Transportation.

Many train-vehicle crashes, sparked by malfunctioning railroad gates and vehicles stopped on the tracks during long backups, have occurred at the crossing, according to IDOT records.

"In terms of safety, this grade-separation project will take completely out of the equation any interaction between trains and the motoring public," said Tom Livingston, CSX resident vice president of state government and community affairs.

The tracks lead to the nearby CSX intermodal facility and the Belt Railway of Chicago yard. The speed of trains crossing 71st Street ranges from 5 to 10 mph because of the location and geometry of the tracks, officials said. About 4,400 vehicles pass through the crossing each day, and the number of vehicles is projected to reach 7,000 daily by 2030, officials said.

The project follows completion in Summit and McCook of two other major upgrades on the same corridor under CREATE, which stands for the Chicago Region Environmental And Transportation Efficiency initiative.

"You combine those two projects that are entirely finished and allow us to double train speeds, and now the grade separation project in Bridgeview, and the result is greater capacity and velocity without compromising safety," Livingston said.

CREATE, announced in 2003, includes 70 projects aimed at reducing train bottlenecks along freight, Amtrak and Metra lines and slashing motorist delays. The entire package was originally estimated to cost \$1.5 billion. With inflation, current cost estimates are about \$3 billion (in 2011 dollars), officials said. The majority of funding is from the federal government. Illinois, Chicago and the major freight railroads are contributing, officials said.

Eleven projects have been completed, at a total cost of \$105 million, according to IDOT. Nine others are under construction, at a cost of \$491 million. Eight are in final design, at a cost of \$300 million.

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