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A fix we need

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s much as Alaska's infamous "bridges to nowhere" costing hundreds of millions of dollars came to epitomize all that was wrong with the nation's spending priorities, there is another that offers an even more egregious example - not because of money it shouldn't have received, but the extent to which it's being ignored.

Nowhere else in North America do six of the continent's major rail networks converge with so much volume. Nowhere else is the number of containers and trailers that traverse the region greater than the volumes at major seaports such as Los Angeles-Long Beach. Nowhere else can be found a comparable level of chronic freight congestion, and nowhere else would a fix have greater national impact.

Yet instead of granting the kind of money to a program that administration officials believed would have perhaps the biggest impact of any freight initiative across the nation, Congress in the last transportation funding bill - SAFETEA-LU in 2005 - instead carved out more than 6,000 earmarks benefiting local districts.

The final bill is so long it crashed my computer. Yet it granted the Chicago Region Environmental and Transportation Efficiency Program, called CREATE, a sum so meager that it has slowed the program significantly and delayed its benefits for years if not forever.

In Chicago each day, 1,200 trains - 700 passenger and 500 freight - crisscross a web of rail routes inherited from dozens of defunct or absorbed railroads. Freight trains inevitably must give way, often backing up into Indiana, and the truck traffic they spawn as containers are "rubber-wheeled" between railheads, contributing to an expansion of the city's rush hour to eight hours a day. Around half of the containers that move inland by rail from LA-Long Beach head to Chicago, and container rail projects such as the Heartland Corridor are under way connecting Chicago with growing East Coast port gateways such as Norfolk. One-third of all U.S. rail traffic moves through Chicago.

"From the perspective of goods movement, I can't think of a single project that would produce greater benefit in the relatively near term," said Jeffrey Shane, who was undersecretary for policy at the Transportation Department during the SAFETEA-LU debate and is now in the transportation practice of Hogan & Hartson in Washington. "CREATE was competing with a lot of stuff, and it was emblematic of the inability to prioritize in this whole issue of transportation infrastructure.

Why raise this issue now? Because SAFETEA-LU is winding down - it will expire in October 2009 - and the cycle of transportation politics is quietly beginning again. The fate that befell freight projects such as CREATE and others the last time around, and in every transportation bill for decades, needs to serve as a powerful reminder of the progress that still must be achieved and the obstacles that will be faced.

Regardless of who the next president is, the obstacles will not go away: Freight projects traditionally receive low priority because the benefits to voters are not easily explained. One would like to think things would be different in 2009. A reform movement will sweep into Washington regardless of who wins in November, infrastructure is a word gaining currency as something wrong with America, and environmental concerns are putting rail freight in a positive light.

But how many times have the hopes of freight interests risen up only to be dashed when congressional negotiators emerge from closed-door meetings?

CREATE fell right into that category. Advocates were hoping for $400 million to $500 million, which, when combined with state, local and private contributions, would have allowed the program to be funded at its envisioned level of $1.5 billion. Instead, it garnered $100 million as a "project of national and regional significance," and has been scaled back to a series of small projects. With the cost of steel and construction rising, the delay has only made the big projects within CREATE even more expensive. But the project will be back in the mix the next time, its supporters promise.

"The question becomes, is there political will to fund this to the extent it needs to be funded," said John Ficker, vice president of supply-chain solutions at First Industrial Realty Trust in Chicago and former president of the National Industrial Transportation League. "It's a microcosm of the infrastructure demands of the country. We've lived off the heritage of great visionaries - Eisenhower, Malcom McLean and even Abraham Lincoln was an advocate of the transcontinental rail system. But we have milked that cow as long as we can, and now we need a refocus of efforts on infrastructure."