

A Grand plan

All it took was \$45 million and several decades on the village wish list to ease the traffic backups caused by freight trains at this Franklin Park crossing

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BY **MONIFA THOMAS** Staff Reporter

If you've ever been to Franklin Park, you know that driving around the near northwest suburb takes the patience of Job.

Railroad crossings at seemingly every turn means waiting -- sometimes 5 to 10 minutes -- for slow-moving freight trains to pass.

Grand Avenue used to be one of the most notorious chokepoints because of two at-grade crossings between Edgington and Willow streets.

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The new underpass at Grand Avenue has greatly improved traffic flow in Franklin Park.

But traffic flow on the busy thoroughfare has greatly improved, thanks to a new underpass at Grand that allows cars to pass beneath the railroad tracks.

"Before, if you got stuck [behind a train], you were just stuck," said Franklin Park resident Melissa Danunno, who used to have to cross the railroad tracks at Grand three or four times a day.

"This is one of the greatest things ever because you don't have to worry about the trains anymore," Tammara Belcaster said.

The Grand Avenue underpass is the largest piece of a \$45 million congestion-relief project in Franklin Park that's scheduled to wrap up this week. Construction began in 2004.

As part of the project, six other railroad grade crossings in the area were also removed and a new street was created west of the underpass.

Relieving congestion on Grand Avenue has been on village officials' wish list for decades, but it wasn't until three years ago that funding started to materialize, Franklin Park Mayor Daniel B. Pritchett said.

The underpass was built with funds from the Illinois Commerce Commission, the Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality program and about a dozen other sources.

It's the first of 25 grade-separated crossings to be built through the CREATE program, a public-private partnership between 10 railroad companies, the Illinois Department of Transportation, the City of Chicago and other agencies to reduce rail-related bottlenecks in the Chicago area.

The 78 projects included in the CREATE program will cost \$1.5 billion to complete, but only \$330 million has been identified at this point. That will be enough to get 32 of the 78 projects into the design or construction phase by 2009, said Larry Wilson, IDOT's CREATE program manager.

The two at-grade crossings at Grand used to see 26 trains per day on the Indiana Harbor Belt Railroad and 18 a day on the Wisconsin Central, LTD (CN). The average delay for motorists was 3.3 minutes, studies showed.

Though congestion relief was the primary goal behind the project, separating vehicle traffic from trains will also improve safety by preventing collisions between the two. In addition, fewer bottlenecks mean fewer toxic emissions from idling cars and trains, Wilson said.