

FRANKLIN PARK: CONSTRUCTION COMPLETE

September 5, 2007

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Franklin Park justifiably is proud of the opening of the Grand Avenue underpass.

A formal dedication ceremony was held Saturday for the first project to be completed under the auspices of the Chicago Region Environmental and Transportation Efficiency program.

The CREATE program is the first partnership of its kind among the state of Illinois, the City of Chicago and freight and passenger rail lines.

CREATE was established to promote critically needed rail infrastructure improvements that would increase the efficiency of freight and passenger rail service and improve the quality of life of those affected by rail traffic.

Not only is the Chicago metropolitan area affected by rail traffic, but also ports on the east and west coasts, said Maria Jimenez, CREATE coordinator.

"Tacoma (Wash.) calls its port the Port of Chicago," she said. "They support our efforts to improve the flow of rail traffic through the (Chicago) area.

"If they're shipping bananas, they want those bananas to arrive at their destination before they're overripe."

The Grand Avenue underpass is the first of 32 projects CREATE is trying to put into place under its initial, three-year plan.

"We are the poster child for projects like this," said Franklin Park Village President Dan Pritchett. "The town founded around the railroad. In the 1860s-70s (founder) Lesser Franklin noticed the convergence of railroad tracks here. And we've had blocked intersections ever since the days of covered wagons."

Pritchett said when he first became village president some eleven years ago, he "quickly" met with members of the Grand Avenue Railroad Relocation Authority.

"They told me they would meet me halfway," he said. "So we met at a truck stop in Joliet. They told me, 'This is what the project is all about. You have to find the funding.'"

The project cost approximately \$44 million with funding coming from a variety of sources including \$14,000 from the Illinois Commerce Commission grade crossing protection fund, \$11.5 million from a Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality grant and \$4 million from the 2005 Federal Transportation Appropriation.

Peter Silvestri, GARRA board chairman, called the underpass project a truly great example of intergovernmental and railroad cooperation.

Silvestri also is a Cook County Commissioner and the Elmwood Park village president.

Silvestri said as a neighbor, the underpass not only is an improvement for Franklin Park but also for the Leyden township area on a regional basis.

"It's also good for businesses," he said.

From a safety standpoint, the at-grade crossings created havoc in times of emergencies.

Larry Wilson, rail planning section chief for the Illinois Department of Transportation, praised CREATE's public and private partnership to reduce rail/traffic bottlenecks.

"We expect the Grand Avenue underpass will be leading the way," he said. "Twelve of the 25 projects (under consideration for improvements) are truck routes. We will use this project as a template."

"As Larry said, this truly is a great example of public/private cooperation," Silvestri said. "In the Chicago metropolitan region, we have (at-grade railroad) crossing on top of crossing.

"This is a stellar example of how government should work together; an example of how to get problems solved."

For Franklin Park, the underpass also allows for the creation of a new street.

"Martens will open up economic development and serve as a passageway from Grand to downtown Franklin Park," Pritchett said.

Parklane Avenue now has a parking lot on the east side of Martens and a cul-de-sac on the west.

"We had to build 10,000 feet of new railroad tracks, and had to keep the railroads in operation," Pritchett said. "We built the Cherry Street connector for companies that lost front access due to underpass walls.

Grand Avenue is an east-west street which extends uninterrupted from the north fringes of Chicago's central business district through the village of Franklin Park west into Elmhurst. It is one of two arterial streets that cross the Des Plaines River, and as such, is a major route in the western suburban area.

An average of 42 trains use the tracks in a 24-hour period, delaying more than 4,000 vehicles before the opening of the underpass.