

Perspective

HON. DAN LIPINSKI



CREATE's completion: A national need

This summer at congressional hearings across the country, in Los Angeles, Memphis, and New York, one point was crystal clear: Completing the CREATE rail modernization program in northeastern Illinois is a national priority for improving the movement of freight in America.

Back in April, I was chosen by House Transportation & Infrastructure Committee Chairman Bill Shuster (R-Pa.) and Ranking Member Nick Rahall (D-W.Va.) to serve on a new panel charged with studying 21st century freight transportation. The 11 members on the panel were given no small task: Take an in-depth look at the country's freight transportation system, find ways to improve it, and report back to the full committee in six months with our recommendations.

As the only panel member from the Midwest—as well as being a representative in the Chicago area, the country's freight hub for more than a century—this appointment has been a great privilege and honor.

More than halfway through our mission, we have toured southern California to learn more about moving freight into and out of our nation's largest port, Memphis, to get a better understanding of freight movement on inland waterways, and New York City/Newark to hear about the challenges of moving freight from ports into and through big cities. The message we have been given over and over again is that the efficient movement of freight is becoming even more critical to the American economy, and that the federal government needs to be doing more to modernize all modes in our transportation system.

At each stop we also heard that if Chicago's legendary rail network isn't working efficiently, neither is the rest of

the nation. One fact that bears repeating: It takes a train two days to reach Chicagoland from the West Coast, but another two days just to pass through the area.

CREATE—the Chicago Region Environmental and Transportation Efficiency Program—is the solution to eliminating the bottlenecks we experience every day in my district and across the region.

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CREATE came together more than a decade ago as a historic public-private partnership of the U.S. Department of Transportation, the State of Illinois, the City of Chicago, and the passenger railroads (including commuter) and freight railroads. Through a series of projects large and small, the shared goal is to modernize the Chicago rail system.

So where are we with CREATE today? Of the 70 projects identified in CREATE, 17 are complete. The total program, when it is completed, is now estimated to cost \$3.2 billion.

About \$1.2 billion in funding has been committed to date on those 70 projects, with the federal government providing about \$450 million of that amount. The State of Illinois has contributed more than \$400 million. The railroads have committed a little more than \$200 million. The City of Chicago has invested \$15 million.

But more needs to be done.

CREATE's greatest emphasis until now has been on improving strategic freight

corridors and tackling smaller rail-specific projects. All of the rail corridor projects in CREATE have been completed or now have funding committed to them. That's the good news.

But the projects with the highest price tags are lagging behind: the flyovers separating crossing rail lines and the grade separations isolating roads from rails.

CREATE's lasting legacy from the point of view of almost everyone in the region is the grade separations. Representing a district with the most rail crossings in the country, I hear more about these projects than any other issue.

Grade separations will provide direct, observable benefits to the public—from the trucks arriving on time to make deliveries to local businesses, to firefighters and paramedics not having to worry about blocked crossings when responding to emergencies, to the extra hours working moms and dads will get each year at home because they won't be delayed by a long freight train on the drive home.

Just two of the 25 highway-rail grade separation projects in CREATE are completed. Four are under construction. The remaining 19 are inching through the planning process and only one of those has the funding to get through construction. Twelve have no funding whatsoever.

For CREATE to move forward and the country to improve its freight transportation system and ensure our future success in the global marketplace, this is something that must be addressed.

With Chairman Shuster convening this special panel on freight, I believe we now have the focus and determination to start finding some solutions.

Rep. Dan Lipinski (D-Ill.) is a native of Illinois' Third Congressional District, which includes large parts of south and southwest Chicago, and suburban communities in west and southwest Cook County.