

(September 18, 2006) Project Launched to Speed Up Trains

Project launched to speed up trains

By Jon Hilkevitch

Tribune transportation reporter

<http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/custom/newsroom/chi-060918rail,1,1177714,print.story?coll=chi-news-hed>

September 18, 2006, 6:22 PM CDT

A 10-year plan to modernize the Chicago area's antiquated freight railroad system kicked off on Monday, but with funding for only about a fifth of the estimated \$1.5 billion cost.

The initial \$330 million will go mainly to preliminary design and engineering work, plus some start-up construction to increase the speed of trains from the West Coast delivering goods here from around the world.

Congress, which has provided a \$100 million down payment, will not be looking to invest further in the program for at least three years, when work begins on the next multiyear federal transportation-funding bill.

Nonetheless, federal, state and local officials announced the project's start Monday on the Southwest Side at the Brighton Park Junction, a 19th Century crossing where four major rail lines converge. All trains, from 100-car freights to Amtrak and Metra passenger coaches, must come to a complete stop at the busy intersection until a switch-tender working inside a rickety shed clears them to proceed.

The project, known as CREATE (Chicago Region Environmental and Transportation Efficiency Project) would ease rail congestion across the country by untying the bottleneck in the Chicago area, backers of the program said.

"Our rail system is in the same condition that the Circle Interchange would be in if it were paved with tar and gravel with one lane in each direction," said U.S. Rep. Dan Lipinski (D-Ill.), who is leading the funding effort in Congress. The Circle Interchange is a well-known highway bottleneck in the city where the Ryan, Kennedy and Eisenhower Expressways and

Congress Parkway meet.

While it takes a freight train traveling from California several days to reach the outskirts of Chicago, it often takes another four days to reach its ultimate destination in the metropolitan region because of severe rail congestion, lack of track capacity and outmoded equipment, officials said.

CREATE also would ease delays for Metra commuters whose trains run on many of the same tracks, especially in the southern suburbs and on the Heritage Corridor line from Chicago to Joliet.

Because of congestion, Metra can operate only six rush-hour trains a day on the Heritage Corridor—three in the morning and three in the afternoon.

In addition to the \$100 million from Congress, the CREATE project has received \$100 million from the freight railway industry and Metra, \$100 million from the state of Illinois and \$30 million from Chicago.

jhilkevitch@tribune.com