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Bill May Improve Rail Lines

Lipinski Said Measure Will Improve Road Traffic in Future

By DERMOT CONNOLLY

The recently announced \$330 million CREATE transportation bill will improve rail and road traffic in the Chicago area in the coming years, according to a spokesman for Cong. Daniel Lipinski (D-3rd).

Lipinski was at the forefront of efforts to get the federal funding allocated for the program, whose acronym stands for Chicago Regional Environmental and Transportation Efficiency.

On Sept. 18, Lipinski held a press conference with local officials and industry representatives near a rail crossing at 35th and Western, which still has an antiquated manual signal system - one of the problems the \$330 million project aims to correct.

"If we do not move forward with CREATE, the Chicago area is in danger of losing its pre-eminent position as the rail hub of North America, a status we have held since a country lawyer named Abraham Lincoln served as corporation counsel for the Illinois Central Railroad," said Lipinski at the press conference, noting that one-third of all rail traffic in the country goes through Chicago.

In addition to the \$100 million the federal government allocated for CREATE as part of a larger transportation bill, \$100 million each is also coming from the railroad industry and the state of Illinois, as well as \$30 million allocated by the city of Chicago.

"The old story is, it takes three days to get to Chicago (from the coast) and then another three days to get through Chicago," said Jerry Hurckes, Lipinski's chief of staff, referring to the traffic congestion in the area caused by trains.

Hurckes said that locally, the funding will go toward improving several intersections notorious for traffic tie-ups caused by trains.

These include 63rd and Knox; 55th and Central; 63rd and Harlem Ave.; as well as one at 71st and Harlem in Bridgeview, and 107th and Central in Oak Lawn.

"Grade separations are planned for those sites," said Hurckes, explaining that at what are now level crossings, the railroad tracks would be separated from the streets by building either overpasses or underpasses.

Although that work won't begin for some time, other less-evident projects have started, he said.

These includes changes being made on track systems that carry both freight and Metra passenger trains.

Hurckes noted that Metra's Heritage Corridor line in particular, which services communities such as Justice and Willow Springs, can only run three trains during rush-hour periods because of the number of freight trains that hold up traffic on the rails.

"Because it is more economical to transport freight by rail, the trains will keep getting longer, and if we don't do anything, the traffic congestion will become unbearable," said Hurckes.

He said the goal is to have much of the work completed in the next three years.

"We want to have something to show for the money being spent, so enough funding will be allocated for nationwide improvements in the next transportation bill," said Hurckes.

Ald. Michael Zalewski (23rd), whose ward is crisscrossed by railroad tracks, said this week that the railroads were one of his "pet peeves."

"I look forward to those improvements coming in a few years, but what we need now is for the railroads to have some courtesy and move the trains through the intersections quicker, instead of tying up traffic. And they blow their whistles all night," said the alderman.