

## (October 11, 2006) Plan to upgrade rails may help area schools

Program to upgrade rails may help area roads

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By Joe Sinopoli

Staff writer

A \$330 million federal, state, railroad industry and city of Chicago program is aimed at upgrading the area rail system. However, it may also indirectly ease traffic on La Grange Road between Interstate 55 and Ogden Avenue.

The first phase of the Chicago Region Environmental and Transportation Efficiency rail improvement program announced last month by U.S. Rep. Dan Lipinski, D-3rd District, of Western Springs is a multi-governmental and private partnership formed to modernize an aging railroad infrastructure that is causing congestion on regional rail lines and highways throughout northeastern Illinois. Improvements will take place over the next three years.

"The main goal is to ease rail congestion through the area because the system is antiquated; we have tracking, switches, signaling that almost goes back to the turn of the last century," Lipinski said. "The idea is to put in these upgrades, switches, signals, so trains can move more quickly through Chicago. It takes two days to get to Chicago from the West Coast and two days to get out of Chicago."

The condition of the rail infrastructure is causing problems for both freight and Metra commuter trains.

"By making these improvements we're going to improve Metra service," Lipinski said. "Right now Metra trains have to stop and wait for freight trains because freight trains have the right of way. Hopefully that will help to get more people on Metra trains, which has the added benefit of perhaps getting more cars off the road."

One component of the plan calls for the construction of 25 railroad overpasses or underpasses located at major highway and railroad junctions. As an example, the junction at 47th Street and East Avenue, on the border between La Grange and Brookfield, is earmarked for a bypass of a type yet to be determined.

"More specifically there are 25 underpasses, so the roads will go under the tracks or over, depending on what works out best for the engineering," Lipinski said. "They are all in the Chicago area. The one that is most important to this area is 47th Street and East Avenue, which everyone knows has been a problem for a long time. Forty

See RAILS, Page 6

RAILS

Continued from Page 3

Seventh and East Avenue is at the top of the list of all these underpasses."

The first phase of the plan begins with the engineering work, the congressman added, followed by any necessary land acquisition.

"That is going to be starting immediately," he said.

Other areas locally proposed for bypasses include 71st Street and Harlem Avenue, just north of the new Chicago Fire stadium, and 63rd Street just east of Harlem Avenue.

The planning process for any of the bypasses includes open forums for community members to express their concerns and for planners to explain what needs to be done and why. Lipinski said a proposed bypass at the track junction on 31st Street in La Grange Park has met with opposition from business and village leaders.

La Grange Park Village Manager Bohdan Proczko said while he has not personally spoken to anyone representing CREATE regarding the 31st Street bypass, he did not think that anything was imminent.

"If it gets built, how we handle the grade separation on 31st Street is something we would be very interested in," Proczko said. "I don't know that anyone has any great answers in that regard. Clearly that will have some impact on us and our businesses that are located there. It's something we are going to have to take a long hard look to see the best way to deal with it."

The level of relief this will bring to La Grange Road from I-55 to Ogden Avenue is purely speculation.

"This may help," Lipinski said. "I don't have a study to show it will, but it may encourage more trucks to take East Avenue. With this change, its possible to look at other ways to encourage trucks to get off La Grange Road. We're working with the Illinois Department of Transportation to find some ways."

The three-year, \$330 million funding agreement includes the \$100 million Lipinski secured in federal funding in August, \$100 million from the railroads, \$100 million from the state of Illinois and \$30 million from the city of Chicago, which serves as a national transportation hub.

Brian Steele, spokesman for the Chicago Department of Transportation, said cost of the program was \$1.5 billion when it was initially announced in 2003.

"CREATE was always envisoned as this multi-year, multi-phased program," Steele said.

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