

(October 9, 2006) Politics of CREATE

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A recent agreement setting aside public and private money for the first phase of the Chicago Region Environmental and Transportation Efficiency rail improvement program may have been less about new money than old-fashioned politics.

Rep. Daniel Lipinski, D-Ill., said Sept. 18 federal, state, city and the railroads agreed to \$330 million in rail improvements over the next three years for the project with the goal of speeding up freight and commuter traffic through the city using new grade separations.

"Working closely with Congressman James Oberstar, the top Democrat on the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, and other members of the transportation committee including Chairman Thomas Petri, I worked to successfully include \$100 million for the CREATE program in the last transportation funding bill," Lipinski said.

"Despite the severe budgetary constraints and the tremendous demands for the limited funds, CREATE is one of only 25 projects designated by Congress as a project of national significance, and it received one of the largest funding levels."

But that level fell far short of the \$400 million to \$600 million that some were expecting to receive from the feds in order to move close to funding CREATE, which is estimated to cost \$1.5 billion.

In addition, the money going into the \$330 million for the first phase of the project -- \$100 million each from the federal government, state of Illinois and the railroads, as well as \$30 million from the city -- had been hammered out as early as April, according to a source familiar with the project.

"There's nothing really new here that I could see," the source said. "I assume Congressman Lipinski had his own reasons for choosing now to announce what he did," referring to fact that mid-term elections are two months away.

While Lipinski is up for re-election in November, Republican contender Ray Wardingley isn't considered a threat. Lipinski's district encompasses a portion of heavily Democratic southwest Chicago.

Roughly \$12 million has been spent so far on the CREATE project, mostly for engineering designs.

Before any of the additional money can be released, the federal government must first sign a document establishing a relationship allowing the Federal Highway Administration to reimburse the Illinois Department of Transportation, which can then reimburse the railroads.

"We're working on the agreement with the city of Chicago and the railroads and hope to finalize it shortly," said IDOT spokesman Mike Claffey.