

(February 2, 2007) Railroads get final ok to tap federal money

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By Bob Tita

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(Crain's) - The U.S. Department of Transportation has given final approval for the nation's freight railroads to draw on the \$100 million in federal money authorized for untangling rail traffic in the Chicago area.

The money will pay for a several small track and signal improvements outlined in the Chicago Environmental and Transportation Efficiency (Create) program, a \$1.5-billion strategy for eliminating railroad and street crossing bottlenecks in the region.

Five freight railroads are matching the federal money with \$100 million of their money. Work on specific projects is expected to begin later this year.

Create organizers were forced to scale back the initial phase of the program when Congress approved far less money than planners had hoped for from the 2005 transportation funding bill.

Bureaucratic hurdles, many of them involving complicated agreements between the railroads, the state of Illinois and the city of Chicago, held up construction work last year.

"It is imperative that we continue moving ahead with Create and keep it on track," U.S. Rep. Dan Lipinski, D-Chicago, said Friday. Rep. Lipinski is one of Create's biggest backers in Congress.

The Illinois Department of the Transportation has pledged \$100 million for addressing troublesome street crossings over railroad tracks. But that money has yet to be appropriated by the state.