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Cong. Dan Lipinski (D-3rd) told those attending the Monday rail transportation hearing in Bridgeview that the need for improving railroad traffic through large-scale infrastructure improvements is one of 25 Congressionally designated "Projects of National and Regional Significance."

The significance may add up to as much as \$1.5 billion in rail infrastructure improvements in the area over 10 years.

"Because of the antiquated system, Chicago has become a bottleneck for freight rail moving across our country, causing days of freight delay and stifling economic growth and productivity," said Lipinski. "And there are other substantial and direct impacts to the public - Metra delays, Amtrak delays, and blocked road crossings."

Last September, Lipinski helped form a \$330 million funding agreement between Congressional and federal officials, the State of Illinois, the City of Chicago, and major railroad companies called the CREATE (Chicago Region Environmental And Transportation Efficiency) program.

The private-public agreement, first of its kind, includes the \$100 million in federal funds secured by Lipinski, \$100 million from the state, \$30 million from Chicago, and \$100 million from some or all of the six Class 1 railroad companies operating in the area.

"With a project of this level of complexity and with a diverse group of key stakeholders, the challenges involved in implementing CREATE were not unexpected," said Lipinski. "I am pleased that the freight railroads, IDOT, CDOT, and METRA have made significant progress in spite of these challenges."

The \$330 million is just a drop in the bucket. According to the CREATE Web site, createprogram.org, "CREATE will invest \$1.5 billion over the next six to 10 years in critically needed improvements to increase the efficiency of the region's rail infrastructure and the quality of life for Chicago-area residents."

Approximately 25 new overpasses or underpasses will be constructed in and around Chicago to alleviate traffic flow between highways and railways.

There will be six new underpasses to alleviate traffic flow between intersecting railways.

Viaducts will be improved, grade crossings will receive safety enhancements, and there will be upgrades to tracks, switches and signal systems.

"Railroad companies return 17 percent of their revenue back into their infrastructure, and it is not enough to grow to meet rising demands," said Francis Mulvey, Surface Transportation Board Commissioner. "Without infrastructure upgrade, Illinois, and the region, will find itself constrained economically."

Some estimates have freight rail service almost doubling in the next 20 years.

"There will be 17,000 jobs created by CREATE," said Mike McLaughlin, transportation director of the Metropolitan Planning Council.

CREATE's published statistics state that more than 38,000 rail-related jobs are in the Chicago region with more than \$1.7 billion in annual wages.

It's estimated that the rail industry generates \$22 billion in annual economic value to manufacturers and businesses in the region.

"What we are really talking about is jobs," said state Rep. Donald Moffit (74th), from Galesburg and Republican spokesperson for the hearing panel. "Ultimately, we want to expand and stay competitive."

Lipinski warned those at the hearing that the SAFETEA-LU (Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users) bill, the multi-million dollar highway and transit funding bill passed in 2005 is set to expire at the end of fiscal year 2009.

CREATE is a recipient of federal funding from SAFETEA-LU.

"With this increasing budgetary pressure, Congress may take a close, hard look at funds from projects in SAFETEA-LU that have not been spent," said Lipinski. "If there are significant federal funds that are still 'left on the table' by the time of the next reauthorization bill, Congress may act to move those funds to other critical transportation projects."

"Clearly, we must work together to move CREATE forward in an expeditious manner."