

## (September 14, 2008) Southtown Star: EJ&E purchase might mean fewer trains for Oak Lawn crossings

<http://www.southtownstar.com/neighborhoodstar/oaklawn/1160196,091408olcolumn.article>

BY NATHANIEL ZIMMER staff writer

Believe it or not, some measure of relief may be on the way for residents tired of the hassles that come with living in a town home to two rail lines and seven highway-rail crossings.

At the very least, it would appear federal regulators are looking kindly on the village's request to prohibit trains from sounding their horns except in emergencies.

At the same time, officials are moving forward with an effort to build an underpass beneath the tracks that cross Central Avenue at 108th Street. That would eliminate long waits for drivers there.

And, finally, despite the much-publicized kvetching in Frankfort and other outer-ring suburbs about Canadian National's proposal to buy the Elgin, Joliet & Eastern railway, the deal would reduce the number of trains that wheeze their way through Oak Lawn each day, according to officials and the company.

For the moment, it's hard to know whether either the underpass or the CN deal will come to fruition. The village would need to secure federal approval and millions in funding for the underpass, and its engineering consultants are still a few months away from completing a feasibility study.

Meanwhile, the purchase is a massive, complex affair that has generated strenuous opposition.

But it is not without powerful supporters, among them U.S. Rep. Dan Lipinski (D-Western Springs), whose district includes Oak Lawn, and whose local chief of staff is village Trustee Jerry Hurckes.

The voices opposed to CN's purchase have been so loud that when Lipinski announced his support at a recent townhall meeting in his district, half the audience booed him, he said.

"I explained that if they were from my district, most of them would see fewer trains," he said. "Maybe all of them."

Oak Lawn would on average see almost nine fewer trains per day, according to CN. The company does not own either of the lines that run through the village, but it uses the tracks of the Indiana Harbor Belt Railroad, which is the line that crosses Central at 108th. All told, between Metra and freight trains, the village is traversed by 38 trains a day, according to federal statistics.

"It's definitely good for my district," Lipinski said. "It's good for the region."

While other members of Illinois' congressional delegation are trying to block the sale, Lipinski says he believes it will go through eventually. The federal Surface Transportation Board must first OK the acquisition, which CN says would allow it to shift rail traffic off lines running through the city and neighboring communities and onto the EJ&E, which arcs around the region, cutting through New Lenox, Frankfort, Matteson, Park Forest and Chicago Heights before turning north.

As the battle over the EJ&E continues, Oak Lawn officials say they are confident regulators will give their plan to create quiet zones the green light.

Village engineer Jack Gallagher said a meeting with the Federal Railroad Administration, Illinois Commerce Commission and Metra yielded no objections.

Indeed, it appears Oak Lawn will not have to undertake some of the more expensive safety measures that regulators could have sought. Instead, the village likely will only have to install medians to prevent vehicles from attempting to maneuver around gates while a train passes. The cost of installing the medians is expected to be less than \$500,000 - at the low end of previous estimates.

Fewer trains, less noise, a grade separation - it almost seems too good to be true.