Trend Analysis: Chicago Region Environmental and Transportation Efficiency Program (CREATE)

Trend Statement

The CREATE program in Chicago provides a useful program development case study for improving the efficiency and global competitiveness of the California freight and passenger railroad network. By organizing more than 70 projects under an integrated public/private program, CREATE achieved the status of national significance. By delivering on a diverse list of program goals to improve mobility, efficiency and the quality of life in the Chicago region, the CREATE projects have attracted more than $1.2 billion from diverse public and private sources in less than a decade.

Background

The nation's primary goods movement corridor extends 3,000 miles between Southern California and the New York/New Jersey metropolitan area via Chicago. This east–west corridor connects the nation's three largest metropolitan areas and its two largest port complexes. It handles much of the nation's intermodal rail traffic and is a vital link in land bridge freight services between Asia and the Northeast/Mid-Atlantic region. Six of the seven largest Class 1 railroads serve the region: the eastern railroads, Norfolk Southern Railway (NS) and CSX Railway; the western railroads, BNSF Railway (BNSF) and Union Pacific (UP) Railroad; and the two Canadian railroads, Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR), and Canadian National Railway (CN).

Chicago today remains the busiest rail hub in the United States. Each day, nearly 1,300 trains pass through the region (500 freight and 760 passenger trains). Chicago handles one-fourth of the nation's freight rail traffic, each day handling 37,500 railcars. In addition to being a national hub for freight trains, Chicago is the Midwest hub for passenger rail. Nearly all of Amtrak's long-distance and intercity passenger trains in the Midwest terminate at downtown Chicago's Union Station. Commuter rail service provider Metra (commuter rail in metropolitan Chicago) operates more than 700 weekday commuter trains on a network (eight times the passenger volume accommodated on shared tracks in Southern California).

Recognizing the growing urgency of the region's rail capacity needs, the federal Surface Transportation Board convened a task force in 2003 made up of representatives from the railroad industry, State of Illinois, and City of Chicago. The task force developed CREATE, a first-of-its-kind partnership between United States Department of Transportation (US DOT), the State of Illinois, City of Chicago, Metra, Amtrak, and the nation's freight railroads.

CREATE partners identified an integrated program of 70 projects critically needed to increase the efficiency of the region's passenger and freight rail infrastructure and enhance the quality of life for Chicago-area residents. The diverse program includes 25 road/rail grade separations, six passenger/freight rail grade separations, railroad projects to improve rail infrastructure and upgrade technologies, a viaduct improvement program, grade crossing safety enhancements, and rail operations and visibility improvements. Forty-five of the seventy projects are completed or

under active development and over $1.2 billion of the needed $3 billion has been secured from federal, state, local, and railroad sources in less than a decade. The project has received $110.4 million in Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery (TIGER), a supplementary discretionary grant program part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, funds through 2012.

Freight System Implications

Chicago has become the largest U.S. rail freight chokepoint. A train that may take as little as 48 hours to travel the 2,200 miles from Los Angeles to Chicago spends an average of 30 hours traversing the Chicago region.

The growing demand for passenger rail service combined with increasing freight volumes and roadway congestion make operating timely and reliable commuter and freight rail service over a shared rail network increasingly challenging. Metra's radial lines cross freight rail lines at grade in several locations, including the heavily traveled Indiana Harbor Belt Railroad (IHB) and the Belt Railway of Chicago (BRC), which is a frequent cause for delays to both passenger and freight trains.

Planning Considerations

Freight rail trade (by value) with Chicago could increase, in part, due to rail network capacity and fluidity improvements across the country. Major initiatives include: construction of the Alameda Corridor East (ACE) grade separations in Southern California; triple-tracking of the UP in Nebraska; double-tracking of the CSX east of Chicago; and significantly upgrading NS7 intermodal terminals in Harrisburg and Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. National trucking along Interstate Routes 15, 70, 76 and 80 is forecasted to operate at generally acceptable levels of service over much of its length, although its forecast to operate at levels of service E and F as it passes through major metropolitan areas — Southern California, Denver, Chicago, Cleveland, and New York/New Jersey. This relatively good highway level of service is due (at least in part) to the fact that freight in this corridor is already heavily served on rail, rather than trucks.

However, the crossing through Chicago has traditionally been a barrier in rail transportation with significant delay in the interchange between western and eastern Class I railroads, either in yards or through the unloading and trucking of trailers across town.

If the CREATE projects are implemented, the major constraints to growth in this service appear to be the capacity of, and truck access to, major intermodal terminals. If CREATE projects are not completed, there could be a shift of more than 20-million tons from rail to truck in year 2020 which would add 2.3 billion truck vehicle-miles-of-travel.

Although CREATE's success might be more difficult to replicate in the current economic climate, the alignment of federal, state and local leadership with multiple railroads under a unified program could guide railroad development private/public partnerships in California. The CREATE program's compelling aggregation of impacts and benefits provide an example of the way that California could package its individual freight projects into Southern California and

Northern California/Central Valley programs that will clearly demonstrate national significance and attract national private and public funding.

Resources

CREATE website: www.createprogram.org

US DOT CREATE Fact Sheet: http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/ipd/project_profiles/il_create.htm l