

Unclogging Chicago

Chicago is rightly called the railroad center of North America. Its closest rival, Kansas City, may be more centrally located in a strict cartographic sense, but commercially Chicago is the winner hands-down, the only location where all six Class 1 carriers meet to exchange traffic. No wonder it's the busiest gateway, handling more than 500 freight trains a day as well as more than 700 passenger and commuter-train movements. One third of all U.S. rail freight shipments – some 38,000 cars daily – originate, terminate, or pass through the Windy City.

But where traffic converges, it also gets congested. It can take a freight car as long to work its way from the old Chicago & North Western Proviso Yard to the ex-Baltimore & Ohio's Barr Yard as it took to arrive from the West Coast – up to 72 hours. Why so much delay? The 893 miles of track connecting Chicago's 31 classification yards, 27 intermodal ramps, and 125 interlockings haven't been updated since the 1920s and reflect few of the changes that railroading has undergone since then, particularly the rise of intermodalism.

Each day, 300 container and piggyback trains arrive and depart Chicago, but most of them use intermodal ramps that have been shoehorned into

the footprint of former carload facilities. These sites were meaningful when steam locomotives picked up and dropped off individual carloads on hundreds of small industrial sidings.

But they're poorly located and connected for an age in which merchandise rides in trailers or containers, little switching is done outside of yards, and even carload freight tends to move in large blocks that originate or terminate at large trans-load facilities.

Speed, rather than access, is what makes a railroad work today, and Chicago's freight network currently can't cut it. Nowhere is this failure more evident than in the practice of shuttling trailers and containers by highway between the yards of western and eastern carriers. "Rubber-tiring" solves the shippers' problem, but it causes everybody else a headache. "The 3,500 trailers that get rubber-tired across Chicago every 24 hours would fill up eight miles of highway lane if positioned a trailer length apart," notes Joseph Szabo, an official at the United Transportation Union.

To combat this waste and delay, the carriers and local and state transportation officials have mapped out a



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The Fort Hayes, headed for Pittsburgh via the Panhandle Route, approaches the 21st Street crossing – one of many enduring pinch points in Chicago – in September 1949.

\$1.5 billion plan to create five rail express corridors across metropolitan Chicago. Flyovers are scheduled to replace five of the most congested at-grade rail junctions, 55 miles of new mainline track will be laid down, 364 new switches will be installed, and 14 interlockings will be automated. The program is known as CREATE for Chicago Region Environmental and Transportation Equity, and it's expected to take five years to complete.

Provided, of course, that the funding materializes. The rail carriers have coughed up \$100 million, the City of Chicago is providing \$30 million, Congress has authorized (but not yet appropriated) \$100 million, and the State of Illinois is expected to commit \$100 million. The balance of more than \$1 billion most likely will have to come from new congressional legislation establishing a federal/state matching-fund program for rail improvements, just like the federal programs that have funded highways

since 1916 and airports since 1946.

CREATE is one of several "public-private partnership" (PPP) proposals on the table. Norfolk Southern has floated a \$3 billion plan to reduce congestion along I-81, one of the nation's busiest trucking routes, by developing two high-capacity rail corridors between Louisiana and New Jersey. The plan envisions a mix of federal, state, and local funds, plus NS's own capital.

If successful, the Chicago plan could serve as a model for PPP cooperation. But CREATE still might be delayed or destroyed by bickering among Illinois politicians as well as Congressional gridlock. That would be a shame. Unclogging Chicago's rail infrastructure would not only bring ancillary benefits to the city, such as the release of underutilized land for commercial and residential development, but would also secure its future as the crossroads of a revitalized rail industry.

—Frederick K. Plous