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Proposal to let agency borrow to boost Chicago-area freight-rail capacity

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A proposal to create a dedicated funding source to better handle the growing volume of freight [moving](#) through the Chicago area was presented Wednesday to the chief planning group for the metropolitan region.

The report by a task force of the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning included the option to, for the first time, give CMAP borrowing authority, using the proposed Metropolitan Chicago Freight [Fund](#) as a revenue stream to issue and repay bonds.

Approval by the CMAP board and passage of state legislation would be required to establish such a fund and to give borrowing authority to CMAP.

Randy Blankenhorn, CMAP's executive director, said the proposal's most important issue would be directing any new funds to relieve bottlenecks in the highway system that affect trucking and problems in the freight rail system that currently are not being addressed by a program called CREATE, which is tasked with increasing the efficiency of the Chicago region's freight rail and passenger infrastructure.

More than 1 billion tons of freight valued at \$3 trillion move through the Chicago region annually, the report by the CMAP task force said. It said 200,000 jobs are linked to the freight activity.

Blankenhorn, CMAP's executive director, said the board will study the report and make recommendations. He did not provide a timetable, but Blankenhorn said much more public and private [investment](#) in the freight system is needed in northeastern Illinois.

"As an agency, we believe in pay-as-you-go (user fees) and bonding authority," Blankenhorn said. But a different agency could ultimately be given responsibility for the borrowing, he said, adding that his preference would be to make it part of discussions about funding a new state capital-improvement program.

The Illinois Chamber of Commerce and other [business](#) groups said they had not yet seen the report.

But the viability of the Chicago region to continue serving as the nation's top freight hub is being threatened by congestion that slows the movement of cargo, outdated

infrastructure, inadequate funding and a complex governance structure that hinders cooperation among jurisdictions, the task force said.

It called on both the freight industry and public agencies to cooperate in the “creation of good freight policy.”

Prioritizing projects that can be self-supporting through user fees should be a major [goal](#), the report said.

But outside funding will also be needed, the report said. It recommended that the proposed freight fund be supported by existing and/or new revenue sources raised from users of the regional freight system. Among the funding sources that should be explored are expanded tolling, container fees, special taxing districts and enhanced diesel taxes and truck registration fees.