

Here's one bit of infrastructure we can't afford to neglect anymore

By Joseph C. Szabo | May 6, 2015



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Metropolitan Chicago's transportation system does more to drive prosperity and quality of life than any of the region's many other economic assets.

This was originally attributable to our strategic location between the Great Lakes, the Mississippi River and the Gulf of Mexico. Our value at the center of U.S. commerce increased rapidly with the advent of transcontinental rail. And nearly a century and a half since the Golden Spike connected East to West, freight remains central to our region's economy.

Since that destiny became reality, our status as America's freight hub has kept bringing jobs and wealth but also congestion and infrastructure needs. We essentially have two options regarding metropolitan Chicago freight challenges: Do nothing and see jobs leave while congestion chokes not just freight but also passenger rail and roads, or take action to reduce congestion while creating more jobs.

More than a quarter of all **jobs** in Illinois are in industries tied directly to freight, generating more than \$13 billion annually. Over the past decade, our freight employment has grown 7 percent, significantly more than the overall regional economy's growth of less than 1 percent in the same period.

Each day, nearly 500 freight trains pass through large terminals operated here by six of the seven major U.S. railroads. Nationally, metropolitan Chicago handles between one-quarter and one-third of all U.S. freight.

UPDATING LEGISLATION

Conflict with freight traffic is a major cause of Metra and Amtrak delays. And on an average weekday (see the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning's **chart** on crossing delays), more than 380,000 motorists spend 7,817 hours waiting for trains at 1,468 crossings.

Congress is discussing a surface transportation bill to replace the two-year MAP-21 legislation expiring May 31. Leaders of both parties express the need to elevate freight policy and funding as national priorities, and our metropolitan region has joined with others across the nation to call for at least \$2 billion annually in federal funding dedicated to freight. CMAP and its counterparts believe metropolitan regions—which drive the U.S. economy—should have more input regarding how freight investments are made.

Our region has carefully prioritized 70 projects to improve freight rail flow and separate it from passenger rail and roads through Create, the Chicago Region Environmental and Transportation Efficiency program. To date, **22 projects** have been completed with \$1.2 billion from public and private sources.

Freight rail traffic in metropolitan Chicago will increase substantially even if we do nothing. So we must instead act decisively as a region and nation to ensure that the growth enhances rather than impairs our economy and quality of life.