

Chicago Tribune

Study takes aim at rail gridlock in Chicago

John Hilkevich | October 1, 2015



Metra trains, at left, and Amtrak trains, at right, are seen Aug. 19, 2015, on tracks near Union Station in Chicago. A report out Thursday said that new strategies, along with some new investment, are needed to end rail gridlock in the Chicago area. (Antonio Perez / Chicago Tribune)

Amtrak report offers map to solve some of Chicago's rail backups

More money alone will not solve the rail gridlock that is choking the flow of freight and passenger trains through northern Illinois and Indiana, a report released on Thursday concluded.

An array of improved operating strategies as well as some new investment are needed to remove the speed bumps from the busiest rail hub in the U.S., said the report, which was commissioned by Amtrak, whose passengers regularly face major delays traveling through the greater Chicago region.

One proposal said that rail dispatchers working for each of the six major freight railroads, as well as separate rail traffic dispatchers at Amtrak and Metra should be located in a unified control center to coordinate trains and improve on-time performance. It's not the first time the idea has been put forth. Most of the track in the U.S. is owned by freight railroads and they generally oppose sharing control. "If you had every airline at O'Hare airport with their own air traffic controller doing everything on their own, it would be a mess," said Howard Learner, who served on a four-member panel appointed by Amtrak last year to produce the report with the help of consultants. Learner is executive director of the Environmental Law and Policy Center in Chicago.

Amtrak, which owns Union Station in Chicago, said it is willing to provide space for a dispatching facility in the station to bring together rail dispatchers currently located thousands of miles apart in Texas, Nebraska, Minnesota and the Chicago area.

The panel also said that several rail-modernization projects that have been awaiting funding for years should be prioritized.

One is the 75th Street improvement project near the Dan Ryan Expressway in Chicago to eliminate rail conflicts at three rail junctions and one rail-roadway crossing. It involves building two flyover structures, almost 30 miles of new track and new bridges at four locations. The project would eliminate the most congested rail chokepoint in the Chicago terminal district, at Belt Junction, where more than 80 Metra and freight trains cross each other's paths daily, officials said.



[Read the Amtrak report](#)

The report also called for expediting the Grand Crossing project in Chicago, as well as improving the approximately 40-mile segment of Norfolk Southern's rail corridor, used by both freight and Amtrak trains, between Chicago and Porter, Ind.

The Grand Crossing project runs from roughly Pershing Road on the Norfolk Southern Chicago line to approximately 117th Street on the Canadian National Chicago line. The improvements would provide for a more direct routing for Amtrak trains traveling to Union Station from New Orleans or Carbondale, shaving 10 to 15 minutes off of train schedules, according to the Illinois Department of Transportation. The projects are under the Chicago Region Environmental and Transportation Efficiency program, which is a partnership formed in 2003 by IDOT, the U.S. Department of Transportation, the city of Chicago, Metra, Amtrak and the freight railroads to invest in the region's rail infrastructure. The program involves about 70 individual projects to upgrade track structure, add a second or a third track to some existing

lines, construct rail-highway grade separations and rail-to-rail flyover bridges and install improved signaling.

Twenty-nine projects have been completed or are under construction, at a cost of \$1.2 billion, according to records on the partnership's website. The 41 remaining projects will require a projected \$2.6 billion. The report did not put a hard price tag on what rail congestion is costing the region. But it said the problem creates an "economic vulnerability" of up to \$799 billion annually. It said six industries are affected (agriculture, natural resources, automotive, manufacturing, retail and services), representing 85 percent of U.S. domestic product.

"The implications of failing to act are dire for the economy of the nation in general and the Chicago area in particular," said Amtrak President and CEO Joe Boardman, who released the findings during a meeting Thursday of academics and rail industry officials at DePaul University in downtown Chicago. The report said that expanding service on Metra and Amtrak in the Chicago area is not possible until the chokepoints are fixed. Each day, 56 Amtrak trains serve Chicago. Metra operates more than 700 weekday trains.

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