High speed funds granted. Great. Now what?

Consider the Chicago-Detroit corridor. Funds will help, but key priorities remain unfunded.

A Michigan-bound Amtrak train diverges at Porter, Ind. West of here, trains face endless delay; to the east lie fast tracks. Two photos: Bob Johnston.

Like a starter’s pistol, the shot in late January from President Obama and the Federal Railroad Administration telling recipients that they will be receiving a piece of $8 billion in American Recovery and Reinvestment Act high speed rail funds (see “News & Trains,” April 2010) set off an immediate flurry of activity, speeches, conferencing, and back-slapping. In fact, the announcements merely signaled the beginning of a long race to begin and complete meaningful projects as quickly as possible.

The goal for states, in reality, is to show tangible results for the dollars spent, even though the money might cover only a fraction of total costs or what the finished product will eventually look like.

Like the $244 million grant for the Detroit-Chicago high speed rail corridor. The Amtrak-owned tracks in Michigan along this line will soon host diesel-powered 110-mph trains, thanks to the installation of Incremental Train Control System signals, a form of positive train control that has been undergoing tests for the past 15 years. But more than half of the funds, $133 million, are for a flyer at Englewood on Chicago’s south side to separate Norfolk Southern and Metra tracks (see facing page). The flyer is only the first step in a series of Chicago-area improvements that will eventually expedite passenger trains. When complete, the flyer will enable Metra to redesign its SouthWest Service trains from the at-capacity Union Station to LaSalle Street Station. Only then can work begin on a new connection to Metra’s Lake-City line, a feat that one official calls “the most daunting and delay-prone corridor in the country.”

Pennsylvania’s Railroads: Broadview and the New York Central’s 20th Century Limited once raced each another here, but today, NS’s right-of-way lies dormant, while freight and Amtrak trains fight for space on former Pennsy tracks.

That worthwhile project needs more study before it gets off the ground, but didn’t get any funding this time. Yet the benefits of higher-speed trains and more frequent service on the Chicago-Detroit corridor won’t be fully realized until the Englewood-Glencoe corridor is eliminated.

Still, the Englewood flyer is the first piece of this complicated puzzle to fall into place. Like other projects that received some of the $8 billion of funding, it’s a necessary building block to lead to bigger investments assuming additional future funding sources can be identified. – Bob Johnston

CREATE wins big with stimulus grants

Key Englewood flyer funded, major upgrades to Indiana Harbor Belt will add capacity

A flurry of new funding sources has pushed the Chicago Region Environmental and Transportation Efficiency program forward since we last looked at it (see “News & Trains,” October 2009). Meanwhile, the CREFIT partners signed the proposed Central Corridor, a route Chicagoan’s January 2009 takeover of the Elgin, Joliet & Eastern Railway rendered redundant.

The most significant project to receive funding is a grade separation at Englewood funded with $133 million of stimulus money dedicated to high speed projects. The junction, where Metra’s busy Rock Island District crosses Norfolk Southern’s main line to the East Coast, got fast-train funds because it’s part of a proposed high speed Chicago-Detroit link (see facing page).

Under the terms of this grant, work must begin immediately. On Feb. 25, Metra awarded the final planning and design contract for the flyer to Transystems, the same company that designed the Argentine and Sheffiled flyovers in Kansas City.

The program also received money from Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery grants announced Feb. 17 (see p. 10). That money will fund Centralized Traffic Control installation at three sites on the Indiana Harbor Belt totaling more than 10 miles (84, 85, and 185), plus new connections at Broawood and Prowo Junctions (82, 84) for $76.5 million. It’ll also fund a grade crossing separation ($414, 20 million), and $5 million for Exs in bridges in the city where railroads pass over roads and sidewalks.

The money represents real progress for the $2.5 billion program. – Jim Giblin

Berkshire close on BNSF purchase

Warren Buffett’s Berkshire Hathaway Inc. closed its purchase of Burlington Northern Santa Fe Corp. Feb. 12 following an OK from shareholders. The $44 billion cash-and-stock deal makes BNSF the first privately held Class I railroad since 1896, when publicly held Union Pacific was bought privately owned Southern Pacific.

The newly formed BNSF Railway has asked Canadian National to negotiate a sale of part of its Drumheller and Oyen subdivisions in Alberta, ON diverted through trains from its Calgary, Alta., to Saskatchewan, Sask., route last January, leaving the 178 miles between Lyalta and Oyen, Alta., dormant (see “News,” June, May 2009). BNSF would bring local operations over the entire route.

Geneseo & Wyoming will operate a newly constructed 13-mile iron-ore hauler in Labrador. The Bloom Lake Railway will connect the Bloom Lake Mine to Wabush Railway. It’s to open later this year.

ARRIVALS & DEPARTURES

OBITUARY

David Salter, 1928-2010

A freight train waits as workers maintain the NS-Metra crossing at Chicago’s Englewood. A flyer will take its place. Marvin B. Reeker

David Saltor, 81, of Lone Tree, Colo., died unexpectedly in January after a brief illness. Salter, an entrepreneur, was well known in the railfan hobby as a photographer and chronicler of disclosures on line and other southeast roads. A native of Pitts, Ga., on Savannah’s Savannah., Ga., to Montgomery, Ala., he contributed to many articles and books, and wrote several feature articles for Trains. — Larry Goodby, secretary, Atlanta Coast Line & Seaboard Air Line Historical Society.