

Chicago Tribune

Breaking News, Since 1847

Construction to begin on Englewood Flyover rail bridges

By Jon Hilkevitch

June 22, 2011

Construction could start this summer on a system of rail bridges on Chicago's South Side designed to unplug a major bottleneck that causes thousands of hours of delay each year for freight and passenger trains, officials announced today.

The \$133 million Englewood Flyover project has been in the planning stages for years. Federal funding covering 95 percent of the work was awarded last year. But the debt-reduction battle in Congress this year threatened to eliminate funding for the work.

It wasn't until Wednesday that the state signed a final agreement with the Federal Railroad Administration, Norfolk Southern Corp. and Amtrak for construction to begin.

Illinois will pay for 5 percent of the project, which officials hope will start this summer and be completed in about two years.

The final agreement was necessary for the federal government to obligate its share of the money, which comes from stimulus funds that the Obama administration set aside for high-speed rail projects.

The rail-to-rail flyover bridges will separate 78 daily Metra Rock Island District commuter trains, and eventually more than a dozen Amtrak trains, from approximately 46 Norfolk Southern freight trains that pass slowly through the pinch point every day, officials said.

The flyover will be built from 57th Place to 69th Street to carry north-south Rock Island trains on three tracks over the four-track east-west Norfolk Southern line that is also used by Amtrak. The project, which will ease one of the nation's worst bottlenecks that forms near 63rd and State Streets, includes a provision to build more tracks when more capacity is needed, according to IDOT spokesman Guy Tridgell.

The future expansion would include building a track reserved for higher-speed Amtrak trains as part of state and Amtrak plans for 110 mph inter-city passenger service from Chicago to St. Louis, Detroit and other destinations.

U.S. Rep. Dan Lipinski, D-Ill., took credit Wednesday for getting stalled negotiations on the project back on track. He said the Englewood Flyover will produce 1,450 jobs and reduce delays for Rock Island commuters.

“This agreement means immediate job creation, better Metra service, less congestion on our roads, more efficient freight movement, high-speed intercity rail and a brighter future for the Chicagoland economy,” Lipinski said in a statement.

The flyover is one element of a broader 70-project initiative, known as CREATE, to modernize and expand railroad capacity across the Chicago region.

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