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Upgrade program running on rails

Shanty's closing is part of track updates

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Railroad workers are pretty darn tough people, but Leslie Moore Jr. says he got a little choked up when the door was padlocked this month on the ramshackle shanty at the Chicago rail junction known as Brighton Park.

It's there, on the Southwest Side at the gateway to sprawling rail yards in the nation's busiest railroad hub, that for decades switch-tenders like Moore manually operated semaphore towers to signal approaching trains to stop, then to proceed through the busy crossing of intersecting tracks.

The semaphores, a visual signaling apparatus with colored lights, were installed in 1944, replacing an even lower-tech communications system -- yellow lanterns that switch-tenders waved at train engineers.

"I liked the solitude of the shanty and being depended on by so many people to keep the trains moving," said Moore, 35, a veteran Norfolk Southern Railroad conductor, engineer, switch-tender and now dispatcher, reflecting on the ending of an era.

More than 70 trains a day inched up to Brighton Park at "walking speed," then stopped, sometimes waiting 10 or 15 minutes for track clearance, and started up again on the congested tracks. It's no wonder it often takes a freight train almost as long to travel through Chicago as it does for the same train to come all the way from the West Coast to reach the outer boundary of the city.

The delays routinely hit passenger trains too. Ten Amtrak trains serving the Chicago-to-St. Louis corridor and six Metra Heritage Corridor Line trains pass through Brighton Park daily.

All that wasted time and lost commerce began to dissipate over the weekend following the 4th of July holiday, when the control shanty was closed and a modern remotely controlled signal system, new crossing diamonds and other improvements were put in at Brighton Park.

Automation of the crossing, a \$9.5 million investment, allows trains to pass through the junction at up to 30 m.p.h. if the intersection is clear of other trains, with higher speeds soon to come for passenger trains. The old rule requiring all trains to stop, even if there is no conflicting traffic, has been eliminated.

"Brighton Park has been the poster child for antiquated rail operations in our area for years," said Chuck Allen, Norfolk Southern's superintendent of the Chicago Transportation Coordination Office, which is working to improve the flow of rail traffic through Chicago. "I know of no other place in the country with this level of traffic that did not have modern systems."

The updated equipment and procedures solve only one of the myriad inefficiencies plaguing the Chicago area's outmoded rail system. But the changes are a start, along with seven other modernization projects planned for this year, and eight more in 2008, that are part of a \$1.5 billion multi-year program to revamp the region's rail network, expanding capacity and improving safety.

The program is called CREATE, which stands for the Chicago Region Environmental And Transportation Efficiency program. It is expected to generate more than \$3.8 billion in benefits to the Chicago region, according to state and local officials.

"We are starting out with the money that is available to do things like adding tracks, upgrading signal systems and increasing train speeds through connections," said Larry Wilson, CREATE program manager at the Illinois Department of Transportation. "It's a huge network improvement to expedite rail traffic through the Chicago area."

As the program advances, depending on when full funding becomes available, five rail corridors would be overhauled. A series of six rail-to-rail "flyover bridges" would also be built to separate freight trains from passenger trains, effectively easing bottlenecks. In addition, tunnels or bridges will be constructed at 25 key railroad crossings to alleviate conflicts between trains and motorists waiting for trains to pass. The separated grade crossings will improve safety and reduce emissions from idling vehicles, officials said.

Until this month, Brighton Park was the only still-operating manually run rail junction handling major traffic levels left in the U.S. It sparked nostalgia and excitement over the old days among rail buffs and historians, who traveled from all over the world to photograph the trackside shanty and watch the line-up of trains.

But to rail freight shippers and the operators of passenger railroads, Brighton Park symbolized the antiquated rail infrastructure in the Chicago region, a global trade center that is in danger of losing the dominance it has held since the 1850s over transportation in the U.S.

So much is at stake. Chicago is the only U.S. city where all six Class 1 North American railroads converge, and half of all U.S. rail freight passes through Chicago's rail yards. More than 500 freight trains and 37,500 carloads of rail freight depart each day from Chicago, which is the world's largest inter-modal container handler after Hong Kong and Singapore, according to World Business Chicago, a non-profit economic development corporation working to expand Chicago's economy.

Moore and his fellow dispatchers at a nearby rail yard now control the trains at Brighton Park. The shanty is locked up to prevent the theft of the semaphore control levers inside. The Norfolk Southern, which owns and operates the Brighton Park junction, is hoping to donate the shanty to a museum, a spokesman said.

"You can't block progress, but it's a little sad," said Moore, a Brighton Park switch-tender for the last six years who now dispatches trains from Norfolk Southern's Ashland Avenue Yards, at Ashland Avenue near Pershing Road. "I almost shed a tear."

Working in front of a computer screen, Moore still functions as a traffic cop, lining up trains and pushing them along. But instead of sitting in the shanty waiting for phone calls from different railroads about approaching trains and having to memorize track-switching alignments, Moore can see all trains coming and going from the computer on his desktop. He clicks the computer mouse to set the signals.

"We can line up the trains much better, eliminating a lot of stops and starts and lowering the costs associated with constantly braking and accelerating," said Moore, a Matteson resident who said his love of the railroads started during childhood when he received train sets every Christmas.

Various levels of government and the railroad industry are four years into the ambitious CREATE venture to expand rail capacity in northeast Illinois, a project of national interest no less important than Chicago's efforts to modernize O'Hare International Airport.

But CREATE's \$1.5 billion price tag (in 2003 dollars) is only partially funded. Some \$330 million has been pledged for work needed over the next three years.

Congress has authorized \$100 million; another \$100 million is being contributed from the major railroads; and Chicago is providing \$30 million. The state of Illinois has also committed to giving \$100 million, but the money is being withheld until the governor and the legislature agree on a new state capital-improvement funding program.

U.S. Rep. Daniel Lipinski (D-Ill.) warned that if a state match is not forthcoming soon -- not only for CREATE but also for many other transportation initiatives needing federal support -- federal money already promised could be in jeopardy and the Illinois congressional delegation would face a more difficult task in winning new grants and funding earmarks.

"The biggest problem I see is that when we start to talk next spring about setting new funding priorities, it will be much harder for the delegation to make the case Illinois should receive more money if we've left federal money on the table," Lipinski said.

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