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Lobbyists ride Amtrak special to Illinois capital to push for CREATE funding

SPRINGFIELD, Ill. – More than 100 representatives from the Class I railroads, Chicago business and community development agencies, and transportation interest groups traveled aboard a special train on Canadian National and Union Pacific from Chicago to Springfield, Ill., Wednesday and Thursday to urge state legislators to support the Chicago Region Environmental and Transportation Efficiency Program (CREATE). CREATE is the \$1.5 billion rail infrastructure improvement project that aims to reduce

passenger and freight-train delays and congestion throughout Chicagoland by constructing highway/rail grade separations, railroad flyovers at locations where key passenger and freight routes cross at grade, and installing track, switch, and signal improvements on other heavily used rail lines.

The initial three-year, \$330 million phase of the program can't begin without a commitment of \$100 million from the state of Illinois. The Illinois Department of Transportation has pledged at least \$100 million for CREATE, but the General Assembly must approve funding in its next capital bill. CREATE supporters held a panel hearing Thursday and visited with state senators and representatives Wednesday and Thursday explaining the economic and public benefits CREATE will bring to Illinois and urging legislative support. Earlier this year, the Federal government released \$26 million of its \$100 million allocation for phase 1; the six Class I railroads serving

Chicago have committed \$100 million to phase 1 projects, and the city of Chicago will contribute \$30 million.

Phase 1 will fund 32 CREATE projects (out of a total of 78 projects planned), including six highway/rail grade separations, four rail flyovers, and 21 railroad infrastructure improvements (track, switches, signals, and viaducts).

The special train left Chicago Union Station Wednesday at 10:30 a.m.

powered by Amtrak P42s 144 and 132, and consisting of nine cars: CN theater inspection car IC 800653, CSX lounge-diner Greenbrier, and seven Union Pacific cars: power car 208, deluxe sleeper Portola, dome diner Missouri River Eagle, dome coach Columbine, dome lounge Walter Dean, dining car City of Los Angeles, and theater inspection car Fox River.

The train operated from Chicago to Springfield on the CN-UP route used by Amtrak's state-supported Chicago-St. Louis Lincoln Service corridor and the Chicago-San Antonio Texas Eagle. Congestion at junctions in Chicago (the CSX and NS crossing Brighton Park, the Belt Railway of Chicago crossing at Lemoynes, and the Indiana Harbor Belt crossing at Canal) and Joliet, plus a signal improvement project on UP, caused the train to arrive 90 minutes late into Springfield. Supporters returned to Chicago aboard the train Thursday afternoon.

Approximately one-third of U.S. rail freight traffic moves through Chicago, and demand for rail service is expected to nearly double over the next 20 years. The CREATE program, which will help railroads meet that demand, is a public-private funding partnership among the Class I railroads, Amtrak, Chicago's Metra commuter rail agency, the state of Illinois, and the city of Chicago.

– Matt Van Hatten