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Officials to congress: More transportation funding

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Calling the Chicago region an "unparalleled hub" for domestic and international freight, Palos Hills Mayor Gerald Bennett on Thursday called on the nation's leaders to "provide the leadership and resources to support a resilient national freight network."

Bennett testified Thursday in Washington, D.C. before the House Subcommittee on Highways and Transit at the invitation of U.S. Rep. Dan Lipinski (D-3rd).

Freight must be given high priority, he said in prepared remarks.

Bennett, who also is chairman of the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP), underscored the critical need for federal assistance for rail improvements in and around Chicago.

Over a billion tons of freight worth more than \$3 trillion move through the Chicago region annually, he told the subcommittee.

Bennett also talked about the Chicago Region Environ-

mental and Transportation Efficiency (CREATE) program, a partnership between the U.S. Department of Transportation, Illinois, Chicago, Metra, Amtrak and freight railroads, that was established in 2003 to implement 70 rail improvement projects. The federal government has provided more than \$300 million, Illinois has paid \$400 million, and the rest has primarily come from private railroads, he said.

It would cost about \$3.8 billion to complete all 70 projects, but there is a \$2.5 billion shortfall, Bennett said. Projects include grade separations, improved signals, equipment modernization and new flyovers.

While 20 of CREATE's projects have been completed, nine are underway. But many have not been funded, including grade separations on Central Avenue in Chicago Ridge over the Indiana Harbor Belt Railroad, on Western Avenue between 135th and 136th in Blue Island, and on 115th Street, from Leamington to Cicero

avenues in Alsip. Another unfunded project would build Metra's SouthWest Service Line tracks either over or under the Indiana Harbor Belt at Ridgeland Avenue in Chicago Ridge where 30 Metra trains and 76 freights now cross paths daily.

"Grade separations facilitate the movement of truck traffic through the region. We need more federal investments to help complete these projects," Bennett told the House subcommittee.

Lipinski said in a news release that the CREATE program is needed to ease road and rail traffic congestion in the area.

"In 2005, I was able to secure \$100 million to get CREATE started and since then another \$11 billion has been invested in this public-private partnership," Lipinski said in the release. "CREATE is reducing costly congestion, saving lives, and leading to more jobs for the struggling middle class. But not enough progress has been made on funding the 25 underpasses that are part of CREATE."