

[Home](#)[Influence Federal Policy](#)[Find City Solutions](#)[Home](#) \ [2011](#) \ [May](#) \ [Local Officials Explore Rail Issues at Conference](#)

Local Officials Explore Rail Issues at Conference

May 09, 2011

by Leslie Wollack

Recently, 160 local officials and railroad representatives from across the country gathered to discuss concerns about passenger and freight rail issues and the impacts on mobility for local communities.

Hosted by DuPage County, Ill., and the National Association of Counties (NACo) together with NLC and the National Association of Regional Councils, the conference explored challenges and opportunities faced by communities as freight rail movement continues to increase and pose new conflicts in communities.

The conference looked at the proposed expansion of commuter rail and barriers to sharing busy freight rail systems. Speakers and participants also focused on the funding challenges for modernizing and expanding passenger and freight rail systems.

Federal Railroad Administration Administrator Joseph Szabo, former mayor of Riverdale, Ill., noted that cities and counties are on the front lines in dealing with both passenger and freight issues. You "ensure that America's economy remains viable," he noted.

Warning that the projected rate of growth in the movement of freight was unsustainable based on current infrastructure, he urged local officials to recognize the connection between local land use policy and accommodating future freight growth.

Szabo called on industry, government and local officials to plan together and thanked the organizations sponsoring the rail conference for their leadership in opening the dialogue.

Speakers representing cities and counties from all regions reiterated the need for dialogue between the railroads and local officials.

Dennis McCloskey, councilmember from Bloomfield, Colo., and the County of Denver, noted that the nation's growth in passengers and freight volume meant that the existing system no longer is meeting the country's collective needs. Based on Denver's experience with the largest rail expansion in the nation, McCloskey called fiscal challenges the Denver region's biggest concern at the moment.

"Every city is going to have a different answer," McCloskey noted, but the country still needs a national dialogue to ensure that everyone can "solve problems rather than passing blame."

After the conference, McCloskey said, "My most serious concern is the lack of unified planning for the predictable 'train wreck' that will occur over the next two decades due to our population growth, especially over 50 year olds, with not just change in volume, but kind of service. To not plan is irresponsible. We have to move from ideology to reality."

The conference also featured speakers representing the nation's largest railroads and Amtrak, as the nation's passenger rail system.

In addition to the workshops and expert panel discussions, participants toured the Intermodal Rail Facilities at the Joliet Rail Yard and heard presentations on the Chicago area rail coordination initiative known as CREATE.

CREATE is a partnership among U.S. DOT, the State of Illinois, City of Chicago, Metra, Amtrak and the nation's freight railroads to increase the efficiency of the region's passenger and freight rail infrastructure.

Encompassing 71 different projects, the CREATE program brings together the government and private sector in a unique program to collaborate in moving people and goods through the Chicago region.

Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning head Randy Blankenhorn pointed to CREATE as a unique effort to think about freight movement as part of a system, identifying what belongs on a train and what belongs on a truck, to move goods more efficiently and ensure that the railroads are good neighbors.

Noting the enormity of goods that move through the Chicago region destined for other parts of the country, Blankenhorn said that the Chicago region faces national scale problems due to the amount of freight traffic through the area, but the impact is local. Solving the problems in Chicago will benefit all the other regions of the country that receive the goods that move through Chicago.

NACo President Glen Whitley, Tarrant County, Texas, judge, said he hoped the conference will serve as the catalyst for continued communications between local and state governments and the rail industry.

“We need to work together to develop a long term strategy to improve railroad infrastructure and freight movement in America,” Whitley said. “It’s a critical component to link communities, help create jobs and enhance the nation’s economic growth.”

Transportation needs to be viewed in context of what makes an economy strong, said Chicago’s Blankenhorn.

“Transportation is not a goal, but a strategy to reach other community goals,” he said.