



Rail reps launch dialogue with area decision makers at Lisle conference

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The nation's rails are going to be moving a lot more cargo in the coming years. Jim Healy is among those who don't want passengers to lose their seats because of it.

As vice chairman of the transportation steering committee for the National Association of Counties, the DuPage County Board member from Naperville helped coordinate an unprecedented gathering of railway officials, legislators and others with a stake in the movement of people and goods over the rail system. The inaugural conference began Wednesday and runs through Friday morning at the Wyndham Hotel in Lisle.

Healy noted that 97 percent of all passenger train travel takes place on the freight rail network, which is privately owned. With growth anticipated in the movement of both people and merchandise, he is cautiously monitoring developments.

"When freight doubles again, at what point will they say, 'We can't handle your (rider) volumes anymore'?" he said.

Traffic congestion caused in the area by trains was one factor that drove the scheduling of this week's meetings. Another was the purchase two years ago of the Elgin, Joliet & Eastern Railway Company by the Canadian National Railway. Karyn Robles, transportation team leader for Naperville, said productive communication with the freight rail operators gained greater urgency after the city learned of the sale from the Surface Transportation Board, which has authority over railway acquisitions.

"Rail transportation is something we're very involved in, so this is a great opportunity to come together and meet and interact with some of the players in the industry," Robles said.

The event's purpose in large part is the creation of new partnerships among public entities and private business. Cook County Commissioner Joan Murphy said it has not historically been an easy alliance, although she noted that the industry's leaders recently have appeared intent on improving relations.

"People didn't like the railroads, because they couldn't talk to them," Murphy said. "But that attitude is changing."

According to Joe Bateman, a vice president of the Union Pacific Railroad, the freight carrier's upper staff includes some two dozen positions focused on public affairs.

Reporting that the industry plans to install \$610 million worth of new track in the next three years, Bateman said the shift from trucks to trains for freight movement is a boon to the economy because it spares wear and tear on the federal highway system, which is maintained with tax dollars.

Randy Blankenhorn, executive director of the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, sees a

use-it-or-lose-it scenario in the burgeoning partnerships. Although he cautioned that the interests of freight transportation must be balanced carefully with those of the communities flanking the rail lines, he was resolute about the need to devote funding to the network.

“If we don’t invest in our transportation systems wisely, then we lose jobs,” Blankenhorn said. “It’s just that simple.”

And transportation systems comprise a huge piece of the region’s infrastructure. A map of the North American rail network displayed during Thursday morning’s seminar vividly depicted the movement patterns of people and things by train. A sparse spiderweb of lines spreads across the western U.S., and a more concentrated meshing of tracks covers the East Coast. The Midwest is blanketed with a solid convergence of rail lines.

“We are the hub,” Blankenhorn said. “When we get a sniffle, the system gets a cold.”

For Robles, now is the perfect time to start conversations about how best to use the rails system.

“The railroads aren’t going anywhere, and neither are the municipalities,” she said. “So any opportunity we have to establish some positive dialogue is worth pursuing.”