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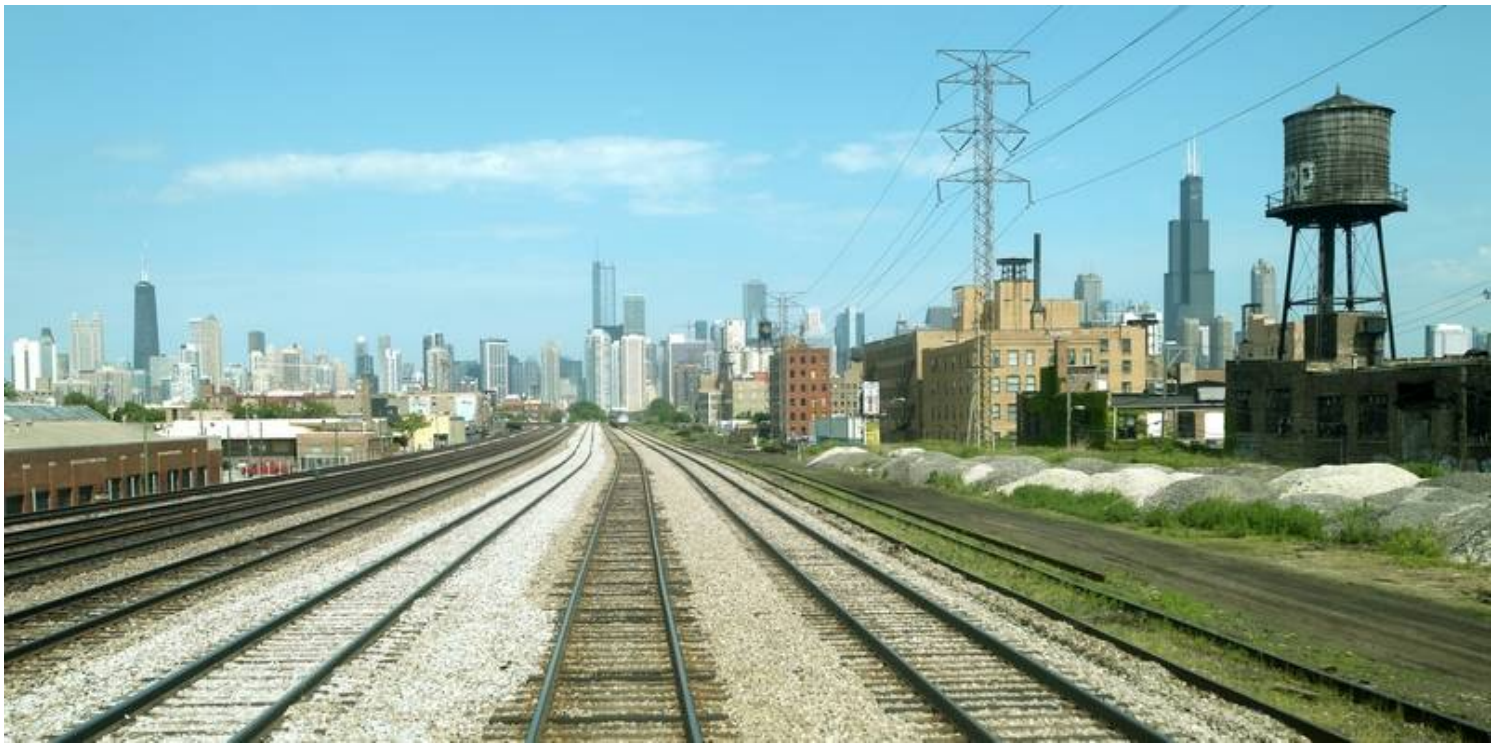
Planners hope federal funding will help ease local freight gridlock



Planners want more federal dollars to move trains faster through Chicago.
Daniel White | Staff Photographer

Marni Pyke

After years of short-term extensions, Congress is talking about a multiyear transportation funding bill that could help the Chicago region untie its freight gridlock, planners hope.

The Senate's environment and public works committee this week passed a six-year $257.5 billion proposal, totaling about $43 billion a year.

Under the Senate plan, Illinois could see about $100 million more in 2016, Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning officials said Thursday.

"There's a modest 3 percent spending increase and it creates certainty for six years," CMAP Executive Director

Joseph Szabo said.

There are also new ideas, including a "national freight program" with allocations of $2 billion in 2016 and up to $2.5 billion in 2021 for highway and rail projects.

Another grant program sets aside $2.4 billion over six years for projects that reduce congestion, improve safety and fix freight and passenger movement.

"This could clearly benefit Chicago as we are a freight hub," Szabo said.

The Chicago region is working on a $3.8 billion program to build bridges and extra track to separate passenger and freight trains expediting travel, but it's about $2.6 billion short.

A separate bill funding Amtrak, however, appears to limit grants the railroad needs to fix a network of outdated tracks outside Union Station that cause delays.

"It's a mixed bag," Szabo said.