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FAST Act transportation bill may bring more transit funds to Chicago

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Transportation legislation targets concerns over crude oil trains

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A new federal transportation bill contains some good news for Chicago's transit users and also includes provisions that advocates say will reduce the dangers posed by the dozens of crude-oil trains that pass through the area each week.

Transportation officials say the [CTA](#), [Metra](#) and [Pace](#) stand to gain as much as 11 percent more federal funding for big-ticket capital projects as a result of the proposed legislation. The money would help keep infrastructure such as bridges and tracks in good condition and pay for new equipment.

The \$305 billion bill would extend federal transportation funding for five years and bring "fiscal certainty" to the transit agencies as they plan for the years ahead, according to Joe Szabo, executive director of the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, and former head of the Federal Railroad Administration.

Leanne Redden, executive director of the Regional Transportation Authority, agreed: "For the first time in a long while, we have a long-term stable funding bill. We know what the future will be like."

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Since 2005, Congress has managed to approve only short-term funding that left transit agencies with budget worries.

The bill was approved by a House-Senate conference committee and must pass both chambers by a Friday deadline, when current transportation funding is set to expire. Sen. [Dick Durbin](#), D-Ill., a member of the committee, was optimistic that the bipartisan measure, known as the FAST Act

(Fixing America's Surface Transportation), would be approved and signed by President Barack Obama.

On Wednesday, one day after the 1,300-page bill was unveiled, many questions remained about what was in the measure and its impact on states like Illinois.

One highlight, according to Durbin, was "streamlining" of a federal railroad rehabilitation loan program. The program provides low-interest loans that Chicago could use to redevelop Union Station.

The city, Amtrak — the station's owner — and Metra have launched a multibillion-dollar master plan to reconfigure Union Station, but they don't have the money to complete the project.

Metra Chairman Martin Oberman said the low-interest loan program also could potentially be used by the commuter rail agency to fund some of its \$11 billion list of capital needs, like rebuilding bridges and purchasing new locomotives and train cars.

In the past, the federal loan program posed "too many hoops to jump through" for Metra to use it, Oberman said. "If we can do financing (for capital needs) more easily than bonding, ... we will explore it," he said.

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The bill also includes some \$199 million for a high-tech railroad safety system known as Positive Train Control, which the federal government has mandated. Metra does not yet know how much of this money it will be allocated, Oberman said.

The measure also includes some \$2.7 billion for older urban transit systems like the CTA to upgrade equipment and structures, Durbin's office said.

CMAP estimates that under the bill, Illinois will receive an 11 percent boost in federal funding for transit, to \$600 million per year from \$540 million in fiscal year 2015.

The [Illinois Department of Transportation](#)'s analysis shows that the FAST Act will provide about \$3 billion for the state over the next five years, an average of \$72 million more per year over current levels. The bill would deliver approximately \$7.5 billion for Illinois highways over five years, an average annual increase of \$134 million from current funding, IDOT said.

Regarding crude-oil trains, the bill closes what critics have called a loophole in a federal regulation that would allow shippers to continue using older model tank cars that have been deemed unsafe as long as there were fewer than 35 such cars on a train, or 20 cars in a row.

The bill also requires that railroad tank cars that carry crude oil and ethanol, whether they are new or retrofitted, be built with a thermal "blanket" to protect against heat and flames. The tank cars also must have stronger protective housing around pressure relief valves to prevent this equipment from getting sheared off in a derailment.

Scores of mile-long trains with hundreds of tank cars pass through the Chicago area each week hauling highly flammable crude oil from North Dakota's Bakken shale fields to refineries, generally on the East Coast.

Critics of these trains fear that a derailment in a highly populated area like Chicago and its suburbs could force the evacuation of thousands and that explosions and fire could cause many casualties. Such fiery derailments have already occurred in Illinois: On March 5, near Galena; Oct. 7, 2011, in Tiskilwa; and on June 19, 2009, in Cherry Valley, near Rockford. The worst such accident occurred in Lac-Megantic, Quebec, that killed 47 people in 2013.

Karen Darch, the village president of Barrington and co-chair of a suburban coalition that has raised concerns about crude-oil trains, noted that the bill addresses the need for railroads to provide real-time train information in the event of an emergency or accident, among other requirements.

"After a first review of the provisions of the bill addressing rail safety," Darch said, "we are very pleased with the comprehensive nature of this congressional action in addressing many of the issues we have raised over the past three years."

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