

Feds Approve Touchy Plan to Reroute Chicago Freight

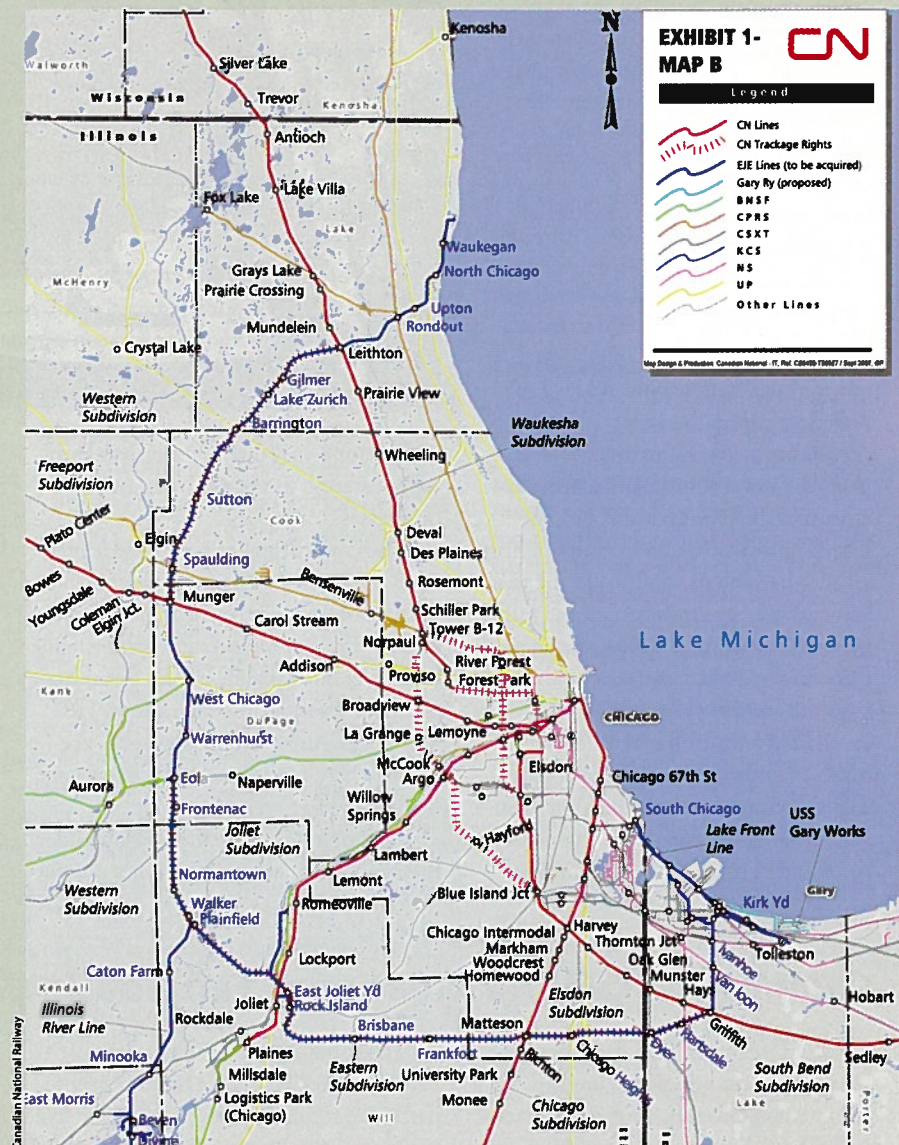
Chicago is the largest rail hub in the U.S.—and the most congested. A third of the nation's freight moves to, from, or through Chicago's complex, radial web of switching lines and crossings.

"It's overloaded," says Randy Blankenhorn, director of the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning. And with freight traffic projected to double in 20 years, Blankenhorn says it's alarming to imagine what will happen if the problem isn't addressed.

On December 24, the Surface Transportation Board green-lighted a controversial deal that may help loosen the snarl. The federal agency approved—with certain restrictions—Canadian National Railway's bid for the Elgin, Joliet, and Eastern Railway, the most complete circumferential route around the metropolitan area. CN wants to buy the EJ&E to create a private bypass around Chicago, moving the freight on its existing five lines in the city to the region's outskirts.

Only about seven percent of Chicago's total rail freight will shift to the EJ&E, but supporters say reduced travel time and freight costs will yield huge economic dividends. Neighboring inner-city areas will also benefit from a reduction in rail traffic, says Joseph DiJohn, a professor of transit planning at the University of Illinois at Chicago. It is important to address congestion because of its effect on communities, commuters, and the environment, DiJohn says. "The quality of life [in Chicago] hinges on that."

However, opponents of the plan worry that those problems aren't getting fixed, just relocated. "Our contention is they're spreading this problem all over the region," says Karen Darch, the village president of suburban Barrington, Illinois. According to the Surface Transportation Board, towns like Barrington, which now see around five to 10 freight trains a day, will have



If Canadian National succeeds in buying the EJ&E, freight would be directed to the region's outskirts.

to deal with 15 to 24 additional trains in the same period. Darch says the increase in traffic will lower property values, create long delays at crossings, and impede emergency response. "Towns will die," she says. "You don't want to think about what will happen."

The deal's tradeoffs have Chicago's planning agency torn. CMAP hasn't endorsed the acquisition even though it acknowledges the importance of faster

rail freight. Blankenhorn says CN is in a bind because programs to improve rail infrastructure are underfunded by the state and national governments. "We need to start thinking about freight in a different way," he says. "The movement of freight is a national issue, but it has local impact. What's the balance?"

—Lea Coon

Coon is a freelance writer in Chicago.