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Battle is on to save downstate rail routes

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While many suburban communities are concerned about increased freight train traffic if Canadian National buys the Elgin Joliet & Eastern Railroad Line, keeping a downstate Amtrak line running is one of the main issues of the proposed transaction.

Amtrak was preparing a response as of Tuesday to CN's proposal to continue paying its same level of costs for 11 miles of track in Chicago it currently shares with Amtrak that is used for routes from Union Station to Champaign via Carbondale and New Orleans via Memphis. Amtrak previously said its costs would rise if CN acquires the EJ&E because it would vacate that existing line.

Chicago area students who attend classes downstate and environmental groups aiming to prevent more pollution from car traffic are both concerned

CN's plan will affect Amtrak's southbound routes to Champaign. 0119

"A lot of people here, that's their concern," said Eric Heisig, a Palatine resident and University of Illinois student who has written about the Amtrak issue for the Daily Illini. "It's definitely one of the big options for people to get home."

Environmental groups said CN's acquisition of the EJ&E Railroad Line would undermine an increasingly successful railroad route and increase pollution by putting more cars on the road. Ridership on the Champaign-Carbondale route increased 23 percent to 124,000 passengers during the past year, according to Amtrak.

"Our major concern is wanting to get as many people out of their cars as we can," said Joe Shacter of the Environmental Law and Policy Center.

While the center opposed CN's original proposal, Shacter said the acquisi-

tion could reduce train and truck traffic by more efficiently transporting goods in a semicircle around Chicago. He hailed the move as an opportunity if issues such as the Champaign-Carbondale Amtrak route are resolved.

Chicago is considered a traffic bottleneck by the center, thus resulting in more pollution from slower trains and more stalled trucks and cars at grade crossings. U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., held a press conference last week to express disappointment with CN's proposal, saying he hoped a route through less populous areas could be found. E. Hunter Harrison, CEO of CN, said in a letter this week such an alternative is not feasible. An environmental impact study is expected to be completed on the proposed transaction in the next 12 to 18 months. The Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning said the time frame of the study should be increased to 10 years from the current three to five in order to consider the longer term growth patterns of traffic and communities.