Duckworth moves to boost funding for O'Hare, rail project

chicagobusiness.com/greg-hinz-politics/duckworth-moves-boost-funding-ohare-rail-project

Greg Hinz February 25, 2019

U.S. Sen. Tammy Duckworth, D-Ill., is wasting no time with her job on a key Senate panel, taking steps today to boost federal funding for two big projects close to the Chicago area's economy: expansion of O'Hare International Airport and completion of the Create project to unsnarl railroad traffic here.

At a hearing of the Senate Transportation & Safety Subcommittee—Duckworth recently became the ranking Democratic member—the senator announced that she and Georgia Republican Sen. David Perdue have reintroduced legislation to allow airports to tap low-interest federal loans through the Transportation Infrastructure Finance & Innovation Act, better known as TIFIA.

Chicago has used TIFIA funding for all sorts of surface transportation projects, including the new Red Line terminal at 95th Street and the downtown Riverwalk. But except for a trial airport project that the two senators pushed last year, airfields have been exempt from TIFIA.

Under the new legislation, many more airport projects would be able to access the federal loans, which can cost the lender 200 basis points or more less than conventional funding. With O'Hare now in the middle of an $8.5 billion terminal expansion and renovation project—and Atlanta's

Hartsfield in Perdue's state with its own needs—you can see the attraction.

It's hard to predict anything in Washington these days, where President Donald Trump has so far not followed through on a promised big infrastructure push. But with the TIFIA program up for reauthorization soon, the big-airport senators are trying to take advantage of opportunity.

At today's hearing, Duckworth also indicated she would push new funding for Create and heard testimony by Joe Szabo, head of the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning.

"We need a strategic freight mobility program that prioritizes the current economic needs of our country while planning for generations to come," Szabo says, as stated in remarks prepared for delivery. "Without such a campaign, U.S. productivity and global competitiveness will suffer."

At current funding levels, the federal government is able to provide less than 10 percent of what's being requested for railroad projects, Szabo said. While projects here such as the 75th Street corridor project have received partial funding—$132 million so far—Congress needs to boost such funding and eliminate caps on non-highway programs.