

Chicago Region Environmental and Transportation Efficiency Program

Regional Models of Cooperation Case Study Series

Public-Private Collaboration Speeds Up Chicago's Rail Network

For the past decade, the [Chicago Region Environmental and Transportation Efficiency Program](#) (CREATE) has improved the capacity and operations of Chicago's rail network through infrastructure upgrades, enhanced terminal management, and reduced road congestion via new grade separations. This unique public-private collaboration has significantly cut freight travel times throughout the region, benefiting the economy, businesses, and residents.

Motivation for Establishing the Collaboration

For the past 150 years, the Chicago region has been an epicenter for the nation's freight and passenger rail operations and is so significant to the national rail network that it currently manages one-fourth of the nation's freight rail every day. Despite an ever-growing volume of goods and passenger rail over the past several decades, Chicago's infrastructure has not kept pace with the demand. In 1999, a debilitating snowstorm shut down the city's rail network, creating a rallying call for both private and public railroads and government agencies to solve the shared problems of rail capacity constraints, operations issues, capital needs, and communications problems in the Chicago region's rail network.

In response to the storm and the region's shared problems, the railroad industry assembled the Chicago Planning Group (CPG), which was comprised of the six Class I railroads in Chicago, two regional carriers, and two passenger carriers, Metra and Amtrak. CPG was tasked with recommending improvements for the industry's management processes and as a result established the Chicago Transportation Coordination Office (CTCO) in 2000. CTCO improves coordination, analyzes services, and implements operations and improvement initiatives for the railroads.

Collaboration Structure

In 2003, representatives from the Association of American Railroads (AAR), the Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT), and the Chicago Department of Transportation (CDOT), signed a Joint Statement of Understanding (JSOU) that established CREATE. The JSOU established the framework for the program and outlined objectives, terms and conditions, and the scope of work. The partners agreed to the following objective for CREATE: "to restructure, modernize, and expand the freight and passenger rail facilities and highway grade separations in the Chicago metropolitan area while reducing environmental and social impacts of rail operations on the general public." This objective is the foundation of the program and guides all of the partners' resulting



CREATE grade separation project GS15a under construction at 130th St. and Torrance Ave. in Chicago



work. CREATE specifically manages the environmental and capital aspects of rail improvements in the region. The CTCO is a parallel effort to CREATE that addresses operations.

In 2007, CREATE members published a [Final Feasibility Plan](#) that lists 78 specific projects that all partners agreed to work toward completing. The Plan was revised in 2009 and 2011 and reduced the total projects to 70. To ensure full investment and participation in the program, CREATE partners make decisions on consensus, where all partners must agree to any suggested changes (i.e., scope, schedule, and budget) to individual projects or the Plan. To build trust among the partners—particularly with the private railroads—all agencies signed confidentiality agreements at the outset of the agreement. Doing so allowed the partners to open channels of communication and share information that would not normally be discussed among private companies and public agencies.

CREATE is led by a stakeholder committee comprised of the IDOT Secretary of Transportation, the CDOT Commissioner of Transportation, and the Chief Executive Officer of AAR. Under the stakeholder committee is the management committee, which meets quarterly and includes representatives from CDOT, IDOT, the Federal Highway Administration, and the railroads. The management committee is divided into three distinct sub-committees: finance, advocacy, and implementation. The finance committee meets on an ad hoc basis to discuss overarching funding problems and solutions; the advocacy committee meets at least once per month to coordinate continuing outreach to intergovernmental organizations, community groups, residents, and government officials; the implementation committee meets every other week—once in person and once on the phone—to monitor environmental reviews, design, construction, and project completion. The implementation and advocacy committees are the driving force behind the program, managing individual projects with consultants and tracking the progress of CREATE's overarching goals and objectives.

The partners track project implementation on the CREATE website, supporting transparency in communication with both internal project managers and external stakeholders. The website serves as a general repository for all information related to [projects](#), including newsletters and announcements, public meeting notes, fact sheets, grant applications and awards, press releases, partnership opportunities, active requests for proposals, open bids, and a project supporter list.

Collaboration Accomplishments

To date, 21 of the 70 projects have been completed and 8 are currently in the final construction phase. Completed projects have reduced freight travel times by approximately 30 percent, benefitting Chicago's economy and reducing the railroads' operating costs. Finished projects have also reduced the number of complaints made to the railroads regarding train delays, providing benefits to local businesses and communities. Prior to CREATE, freight trains traveling from the West Coast to the East Coast spent roughly two days moving through Chicago. CREATE projects have cut 12 hours from manifest freight travel and detention times, leading to local and regional economic benefits and reduced congestion throughout the Chicago rail and roadway networks.

In addition to CREATE, the railroads spend millions of dollars annually on maintenance and infrastructure upgrades outside of the program. CTCO reported that the Class I railroads have spent nearly \$4.5 billion outside of the CREATE program to upgrade and maintain the Chicago area terminal since 1998. Also, safety and accounting standards that were developed within CREATE programs have been utilized in other areas, such as highway projects, across Illinois.



Challenges and Lessons Learned

CREATE's success has largely stemmed from a common concern for Chicago's rail capacity and operations problems among the private and public railroads and government agencies. Further success is realized from an active advocacy effort and private funding that partially supports public projects, such as grade separations. Securing federal funding for projects built by private companies can be challenging, but CREATE offered a way for IDOT and CDOT officials to work with the railroads to institute protocols and documentation that would allow the railroads to work with federal funding. CREATE's ability to overcome this challenge set a precedent for public-private partnerships, and it established a process for effectively using innovative funding sources such as Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery (TIGER) grants. CREATE secured two TIGER grants totaling \$110.4 million.

The railroads' flexibility with funding also helped keep CREATE programs moving, especially when public funding was not available as anticipated. IDOT agreed to fund environmental work and the railroads agreed to fund design and construction. When the State of Illinois was unable to provide the anticipated funding for environmental reviews on CREATE projects, the railroads matched federal investments at the local level to keep projects moving and to ensure future public investment in the region's rail network.

The CREATE project revealed the importance of opening lines of communication. Using the JSOU and confidentiality agreements as a foundation for building trust and communications, the CREATE partners can now call on each other whenever necessary to efficiently solve problems, secure funding, and complete projects.

