



Chicago Region Environmental and Transportation Efficiency Program: Public-Private Collaboration on Rail Projects

Quick Information

Organization(s): Association of American Railroads (AAR); Chicago Department of Transportation (CDOT), Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT)

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Cooperation Topic(s): Congestion Management; Economic Development; Freight Planning

Cooperation Practice(s): Project Partnerships

Cost Information: Costs spread among agencies between projects

For the past decade, the Chicago Region Environmental and Transportation Efficiency Program (CREATE) has improved Chicago's freight, passenger, and commuter rail network by implementing 70 projects that address capacity and operational needs. Such projects include 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.



Figure 14. CREATE grade separation project GS15a under construction at 130th St. and Torrence Ave. in Chicago. Source: CREATE

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. The region is so significant to the country's rail network that it currently manages one-fourth of the Nation's freight rail every day. Despite an ever-growing volume of goods and number of rail passengers over the past several decades, Chicago's infrastructure has not kept pace with demand. In 1999, a debilitating snowstorm shut down the city's rail network, inspiring 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 works to improve coordination, analyze services, and implement operations improvement initiatives for the railroads. 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.

Collaboration Structure

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 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 operational improvements.

In 2007, CREATE members published a [Final Feasibility Plan](#) that listed 78 specific projects that the partners jointly identified and agreed to work toward completing. The partners revised the plan in 2009 and 2011, reducing the total projects to 70. The group identified projects through input from key stakeholders and use of a model, described in the following sections that simulated how performance would change given different improvements.

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 ensure full investment and participation in the program. Consensus can typically be reached in staff-level discussions, but at times certain decisions may also require management-level discussions. Each partner follows its own internal processes for project construction. Auditors from IDOT frequently review practices and recommend revised processes, and the partners incorporate these recommendations as appropriate. 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 between private companies and public agencies.

Takeaways

- In 2003, representatives from AAR, IDOT, and CDOT signed a JSOU that established the CREATE Program to address railroad-related capital improvement needs.
- The Chicago region manages $\frac{1}{4}$ of the Nation's freight rail every day. Trains had experienced extensive delays due to rail capacity and operations issues.
- CREATE members published a Final Feasibility Plan that lists 70 projects all partners agreed to pursue.
- CREATE is led by a stakeholder committee, under which is a management committee comprised of finance, advocacy, and implementation committees.
- The partners track project implementation on the CREATE website, which serves as a repository for all public information.
- In CREATE, a common concern for Chicago's future freight capacity and congestion issues led to a foundation for strong future partnerships and collaborations.

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. A number of committees conduct key activities for CREATE under the leadership of the stakeholder committee. The management committee, which directly reports to the stakeholder committee, meets quarterly and includes representatives from CDOT, IDOT, FHWA, and the railroads. The management committee contains three distinct sub-committees: finance, advocacy, and implementation. The finance committee meets on an ad hoc basis to discuss overarching funding needs and opportunities. 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 twice per month—once in person and once over the phone—to monitor progress on environmental reviews, design, construction, and project completion.

Committee meetings are scheduled several months in advance to facilitate maximum participation. Stakeholders can participate in person or remotely via a web room, which allows many individuals who cannot travel to the meeting location to attend. The CREATE team has found that providing visual reference points at committee meetings—such as agendas and project status charts—helps participants remain engaged. The agendas for committee meetings have a common template, but individual items are added and deleted depending on what projects are active at any given time.

The implementation and advocacy committees are the driving force behind CREATE, managing individual projects with consultants and tracking the progress of the program's overarching goals and objectives on a day-to-day basis. The advocacy committee is partially comprised of public affairs staff and Government Relations officers. This group drives CREATE's outreach efforts by ensuring communications are executed in a coordinated manner and project partners are kept well informed of communication efforts. As the CREATE program continues to become more well-known, the partners have found it is essential to maintain a unified, coordinated message on all program communications.

The partners track project implementation on the CREATE website in order to create transparency in communication with both internal project managers, external stakeholders, and the general public. The website serves as a repository for all public 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. The CREATE partners jointly fund website maintenance.

Collaboration Accomplishments

As of May 2016, 25 of the 70 projects were completed and 9 were in 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. Reduced delays for freight and passenger rail provide benefits to local businesses and communities by ensuring that business' goods arrive on time and people can travel more efficiently. 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.

CREATE conducted a number of modeling exercises to simulate the various scenarios that could develop as a result of implementation of different projects. The group used the model to identify and select projects for the final project list, based on the projects' impacts on capacity and congestion. The model provided information about the effects of different projects on not only specific areas, but across the entire region. It has proven useful to CREATE because it has the functionality to account for multiple factors and evaluate the proposed effects of different variables in real time. CREATE also uses the model to evaluate the environmental effects of any project in which a transit system is built close to residential areas in order to estimate impacts on noise, pollution, and vibrations on the communities that live there. This information is later combined with traffic noise information in order to illustrate a comprehensive picture of the effects of different projects.

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 terminal area 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 private sector stakeholders and government agencies. Further success has been realized due to an active advocacy effort and private sector funding that partially supports public projects, such as grade separations. Securing Federal funding



Figure 15. Ensuring that containerized freight on railroads can efficiently move between and through cities is an important aspect of CREATE.

Source: Volpe Center

for private companies' projects 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, establishing a process for effectively using innovative funding sources such as Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery (TIGER) and FRA High-Speed Intercity Passenger Rail Program (HSIPR) grants. CREATE has secured two TIGER grants totaling \$110.4 million and a HSIPR grant of \$126 million. Using the HSIPR grant, the CREATE stakeholders recently completed the [Englewood Flyover project](#), which is a rail bridge that carries the Metra Rock Island tracks over a set of tracks used by Amtrak and freight trains. The project benefits include eliminating conflicts between different trains, improving air quality for area residents, and eliminating noise pollution from idling trains. The project was completed in May 2016.

The railroads' flexibility with funding has also helped keep CREATE projects moving, particularly during periods between application and receipt of public grant funding. At times, the railroads have provided local match for Federal funding to keep projects moving and to preserve the opportunity for future public investment in the region's rail network. IDOT oversees management of environmental work, while design and construction are typically overseen by the entity that will ultimately own the asset (i.e., a railroad, IDOT, or CDOT).

The CREATE program revealed the importance of opening lines of communication. CREATE stakeholders noted that while it can sometimes be difficult to penetrate large bureaucracies like railroads and government agencies, establishing personal relationships helps to facilitate future collaborative work. One of the greatest benefits of the program is the enhanced communications network among the public and private sector partners involved. 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, strategize, and complete projects.

Additional Resources

- [CREATE](#)
- [CREATE Final Feasibility Plan](#)
- [CREATE Project Status Map](#)
- [Englewood Flyover Project](#)