

## Chicago, you've got a lot at stake in this legislation

Joseph C. Szabo | November 23, 2015

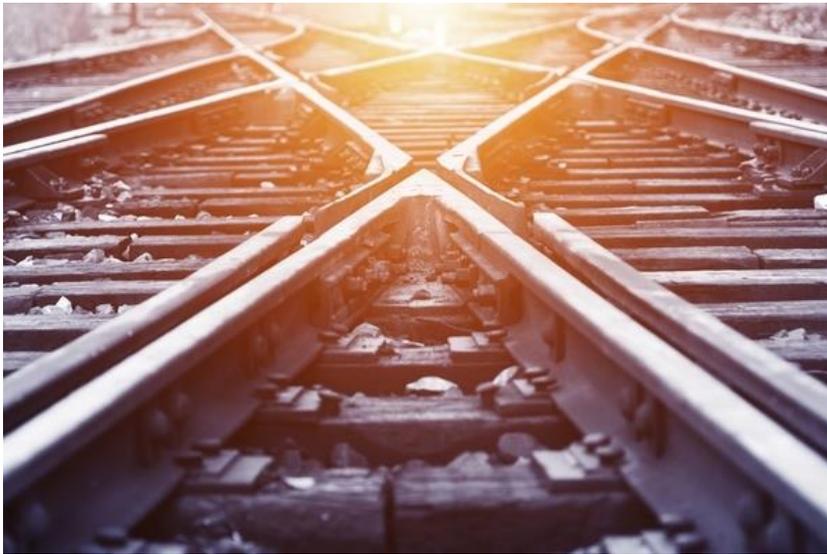


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Congress is about to reconcile two transportation bills approved separately by the Senate and the House of Representatives. The stakes could scarcely be higher for this region's transportation system and, therefore, our economy and quality of life.

First, some positives. Both bills for the first time include dedicated funding for multimodal freight infrastructure—including the U.S. rail system whose hub is metropolitan Chicago. (Between one-quarter and one-third of all U.S. freight originates, terminates or passes through our region.) Both bills authorize six years of overall funding for the national transportation system, which would provide welcome certainty after years of temporary extensions followed in 2012 by a meager two-year bill.

Next, some potential negatives. The House bill provides only for inflation increases of less than 2 percent per year. While the Senate bill is an improvement with average annual increases of just over 3 percent, it provides just \$36 billion more over six years. And significantly for metropolitan Chicago, the two bills differ in the priority that each attaches to mass transit.

Ours is the second-largest U.S. transit system, averaging 2 million trips each weekday. More than 12 percent of the region's residents take transit to reach their jobs, including 31 percent of everyone who works in the city of Chicago. It is vitally important that the Illinois delegation seek to ensure that transit is a high priority in the final legislation.

After decades of underinvestment, our region's aging transit infrastructure requires substantial funding just to reach a good state of repair, and more funding is needed to modernize the system. The lion's share of capital funds for our region's transit agencies comes from federal appropriations, which would actually decrease if the House bill's language prevails over the Senate's.

The Illinois delegation should also insist on annual U.S. freight funding of at least \$2 billion, which should be allocated in a new "mode neutral" program that supports more than road improvements—rail and port projects must be eligible. Large urbanized regions like ours play a critical role in managing goods movement. As confirmed by a Senate report, rail congestion here in the Chicago region affects the entire country, making farm goods, retail products, manufactured goods and raw materials late to market.

The federal bill should give metropolitan regions a role in prioritizing and selecting freight projects, rather than leave all such choices to the states. Through the Create public-private partnership, metropolitan Chicago has very clearly identified necessary rail improvements that will benefit the entire nation.

CMAA continues to stand by its principles for federal transportation reauthorization, including the need to select projects based on measurable outcomes, which we call "performance-based funding." With that kind of level playing field—and continued vigilance by our elected officials—metropolitan Chicago could prosper if the final legislation supports the needed strategic investments in freight and transit.

*Joseph C. Szabo is executive director of the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning.*