

# Residents, rail projects clashing across U.S.

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WASHINGTON -- Changes in global trade and the economy mean that more freight trains are moving through America's neighborhoods and communities, but not everyone hears romance when a locomotive whistles in the night.

Along the shores of Washington state, through the suburbs of Chicago and even in the shadow of the U.S. Capitol, traffic has come back to the rails.

But with its resurgence comes more potential for conflict with neighbors who may not have thought twice about buying a house near the tracks in quieter times.

"It's been known for at least 15 years that railroads were recovering market share," said Tony Hatch, a rail industry analyst. "That does mean somewhere there's going to be more trains."

In the Pacific Northwest, a plan involving rail to build five new export terminals would turn the region into a major exporter of coal, a commodity that environmentalists loathe.

In the nation's capital, the CSX line wants to demolish the century-old Virginia Avenue Tunnel near a historic neighborhood not far from the Capitol and replace it with one wide enough for two tracks and tall enough for double-stacked containers.

Railroads have invested billions to improve their network in the past three decades, but the federal government and states have had to make large investments to deal with rail choke points in urban areas.

Some of the most congested cities, including Fort Worth, Kansas City, Chicago and Los Angeles, have or will receive hundreds of millions of dollars in government financing to get trains out of one another's way -- and the public's.

"Nationally, we need those bottlenecks to be addressed," said David Clarke, director of the Center for Transportation Research at the University of Tennessee. "There's a lot of commerce at stake."

In Fort Worth, officials have secured more than \$100 million in private and public money to remake Tower 55, a rail yard in the shadow of the downtown Mixmaster that's considered one of the most congested rail intersections in the U.S. The plan includes overhauling several pedestrian crossings just north of downtown, where children commonly crawl under train cars to get to school, and add a third north-south rail line.

Work on Tower 55, which includes \$34 million in federal funds, should begin in a couple of months, said Clint Schelbitzki, a spokesman for Union Pacific Railroad.

"We're still in the planning stages," Schelbitzki said. "There's a lot of cross-coordination that needs to occur between BNSF, the city of Fort Worth and Union Pacific. We're getting the final details ironed out on the construction schedule. We're still expecting construction late in the fourth quarter or the first quarter of next year. We have 31 months from when the money was obligated, and we're going to meet the deadline for 31 months."

In September 2011, Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood visited Fort Worth to officially sign the documents to begin the Tower 55 project. At that time, it was scheduled to begin in April 2012 and be completed by 2014, but negotiations among the two railroads and the city have taken longer than expected.

In Washington, D.C., neighbors voiced their frustration at a recent public meeting about the \$160 million CSX tunnel project. It would take two or three years, and residents would face construction noise, street closures and possibly trains running through a trench right outside their windows.

Officials with CSX, based in Jacksonville, Fla., whose network covers the eastern third of the country, wouldn't comment on what the railroad might do to ease concerns. But they said the project must undergo an environmental review before construction begins.

"It is very helpful as the process develops to hear from the public," said Chip Dobson, the tunnel project manager for CSX, though he added that "some things may not be feasible or possible."

Mike McMurtrie, who lives nearby, accepts that the neighborhood would be inconvenienced for a while.

"I think it's a necessary thing," he said.

Near Bellingham, Wash., coal for the proposed Pacific Gateway Terminal would arrive by trains from mines in the Powder River Basin in Wyoming and Montana and would be transferred to ships bound for power plants in Asia.

Supporters see an opportunity to boost tax revenue and jobs in a region with high unemployment. They say the project will add 400 workers when at full capacity.

"A lot of people's lives depend on getting these jobs," said Allen Brown, a retired firefighter who lives in Bellingham. "You can't feed your family serving coffee at Starbucks."

But critics worry about the noise, the coal dust, the exhaust and road-crossing delays. One of the region's largest Indian tribes, the Lummi Nation, opposes the project because of its potential impact on waterways.

"The more that people learn about these projects, the less they like them," said Jan Hasselman, an attorney for the environmental group Earthjustice.

Communities have little power to control what moves by rail within their borders. Some have tried to ban certain cargo, such as coal, but only the federal government can regulate interstate commerce.

Others have demanded that the railroads pay for overpasses and underpasses, a responsibility that usually falls to state and local governments.

The Canadian National Railway's plan to reroute freight away from congested downtown Chicago and into the suburbs has become a flash point.

When trains of 10,000 feet or longer began rolling through the village of Barrington, they blocked four road crossings at once, splitting the town down the middle, separating the business district from a high school and a hospital.

"More is coming, and we know it," said Karen Darch, president of the village, which wants the federal government to force the railroad to pay for a highway overpass through town.

But whether it's Barrington, Bellingham or Washington, D.C., Hatch, the rail industry analyst, is optimistic that disputes can be settled.

"Those problems can be mitigated," he said, "and in several years maybe we'll forget there was a fight about it."

Staff writer Gordon Dickson contributed to this report.

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