An estimated 25 percent of all of the nation’s rail traffic goes through Chicago, where 56 Amtrak trains originate or terminate every day and where six of the nation’s seven largest railroads converge. But the Midwest’s largest city isn’t just a hub of rail transportation; it’s also known as a major “chokepoint”: a source of gridlock, poor on-time performance and dispatching problems. In October, Amtrak’s Chicago Gateway Blue Ribbon Panel released its recommendations for loosening the Chicago “chokepoint,” which poses a larger economic vulnerability to the U.S. economy than any other major rail hub. (A panel-commissioned study estimated that up to $799 billion in annual gross domestic product depends on freight rail service through Chicago.)

The panel’s suggested fix would have significant implications for passenger rail service in the Midwest. For example, it proposes development of a route dedicated to trains that take passengers between Chicago, Indiana, Michigan and other points east. This new route would free up freight service while allowing for 110 mph passenger-rail service between Chicago and Detroit.

Other recommendations call for the completion of projects already identified in the Chicago Region Environmental and Transportation Efficiency Program, or CREATE. Those projects range from constructing new overpasses and underpasses to upgrading tracks, grade crossings, switches and signal systems and integrating dispatch systems.

They all have the goal of improving rail efficiency and on-time performance.

Right now, CREATE projects must compete for federal dollars through the Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery, or TIGER, program. In 2015, $500 million in TIGER grants were available for surface-transportation projects. But CREATE’s $56 million application for two priority projects was not chosen.

Two other recommendations from the Amtrak panel were included in legislation recently passed by the U.S. Congress. One provision reforms the Federal Railroad Administration’s revolving-loan and loan-guarantee program.

Under the program, the FRA can issue up to $35 billion in loans to railroads and governmental entities for freight and passenger rail investments. However, this loan program has been underutilized. The new federal law expands and streamlines the loan program. A second provision streamlines the environmental-review process for rail program (similar to changes recently made for federal highway and transit projects).