



The Burlington Northern Santa Fe Monticello spur crosses the Canadian Pacific mainline near Bottineau Boulevard in Crystal. The railways have proposed a connection that would route some of the mainline traffic south on the BNSF spur. (Staff photo: Bill Klotz)

Dayton seeks study of Crystal freight rail change

By: Cali Owings February 23, 2015 5:24 pm 0

Gov. Mark Dayton is calling for a full environmental evaluation of a track change in Crystal that would route more freight traffic through the northwest suburbs and north Minneapolis and possibly affect a future light rail transit line to Brooklyn Park.

Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway Co. is working on an agreement with Canadian Pacific Railway Ltd. to build a track connection in Crystal that would route some eastbound Canadian Pacific traffic south into Robbinsdale, Golden Valley and north Minneapolis.

While the agreement isn't finalized yet, cities and other agencies in the affected area are raising concerns about the impact of increased freight traffic on emergency routes, park land, congestion and the Blue Line LRT extension (also known as the Bottineau line) to Brooklyn Park. They're calling for a full environmental study that evaluates potential impacts and outlines mitigation measures.

Dayton joined the effort last week by calling for the full environmental review in a letter to the Surface Transportation Board, a federal regulatory body that oversees the freight industry.

The proposed track connection was indirectly made public to city officials in Crystal only after businesses and property owners near the intersection of both tracks were contacted by the railroad, said John Sutter, acting community development director for the city. BNSF officials told the city earlier this month that it plans to acquire properties before submitting plans to the Surface Transportation Board.

By acquiring the land before submittal to the board, Sutter said it seems like the railroads are trying to "evade" a more thorough environmental evaluation. A full draft environmental impact statement is usually required, but there are exemptions for constructing connecting track on land owned by railroads.

The railroad plans to comply with whatever environmental review process is required by the Surface Transportation Board, said BNSF Minnesota spokeswoman Amy McBeth, noting that connecting track construction is on a smaller scale than other rail projects.

McBeth said the goal of the Crystal connection project is to move trains more efficiently through the metro region in response to concerns from customers and elected officials, including Gov. Dayton. It's one of several the railroad plans this year to address service issues across the state. BNSF is using its "existing infrastructure to better manage train traffic in the region," McBeth said.

Even so, Sutter emphasized the change isn't just a "slight adjustment in existing rail flow."

"Environmental issues presented by this type of radical change on the [Burlington Northern] line need to be looked at in thorough detail," he said Monday. Today, the rail corridor is lightly used with two to three shorter trains making round trips per week, according to the city. In contrast, the Canadian Pacific line carries dozens of freight trains per day that are between 1 and 2 miles in length.

If the connection is made, a mile-long Canadian Pacific train could close the four at-grade crossings in Crystal and make it difficult for emergency vehicles to reach the northern third of the city, Sutter said.

Farther south in Robbinsdale, a mile-long train would also block four intersections simultaneously for five minutes or more, according to that city. At present, trains typically clear the BNSF line in less than one minute.

The new freight traffic could also be more volatile and dangerous than current shipments through the corridor.

"A high volume of mainline traffic, including High Hazard unit trains originating in the Bakken oil fields, would be diverted onto a lightly constructed and maintained single track line," Dayton wrote in the letter.

Changes to freight traffic could also affect an LRT project that is expected to share 8.5 miles of the existing BNSF corridor, pending an agreement with the railway. Plans for the route call for LRT vehicles sharing the 100 feet of right of way with freight trains from Olson Memorial Highway on the border of Golden Valley and Minneapolis to 73rd Avenue North in Brooklyn Park, said Laura Baenen, Metro Transit's spokeswoman for the Blue Line extension project.

If the connection project moves forward, both parties will work together to make sure neither alignment interferes with the other, Baenen said. Physical separation may be required depending on the distance between the freight and rail lines. McBeth said increased traffic on the BNSF track should not have a "significant impact" on the planned line.

Baenen said BNSF told the project office it wants to coordinate project designs to determine how to "accommodate both BNSF and LRT construction and operations in and around Crystal."

Without a full environmental impact statement, cities are in the dark, said Crystal City Council member Olga Parsons. Cities can only speculate how they will be affected based on current traffic levels and have little idea about what the railroads plan to do once the connection is established, she said.

While operating freight and light rail along the same corridor was already a concern to some residents, safety issues could be exacerbated by increased traffic, Parsons said.

"If it all goes through as planned — it sounds to me like a serious safety issue for people riding the light rail just because of the volume of traffic on those tracks," she said.

Since the railway has not submitted plans for the connection yet, there's little local or state officials can do besides raise awareness for the full environmental review. Once the railroads seek approval from the Surface Transportation Board, the federal agency will determine whether a full environmental review is required or if the move qualifies for an exemption.