

Draft *Transit is the Answer* - Summary

Note: This document is a summary of the Draft Transit is the Answer plan, released for public comment by the Regional Transportation Authority (RTA) from December 5, 2022, to January 9, 2023, and translated into Spanish. If an individual or organization would like to request document translation in another language or a meeting with the RTA to discuss the strategic plan in Spanish or another language, please email Communications@RTAChicago.org.

Trains, buses, and paratransit have been part of the social and economic fabric of Chicago and the surrounding communities in the six-county RTA region for over 100 years. Like our Great Lake, innovative architecture, and magnificent human diversity, our transit system is what makes us who we are. Millions have stepped from platforms and sidewalks onto trains and buses with fellow riders that have a common purpose: To go somewhere. Generations have taken part in the daily ritual of a bus ride home after a long workday or jumped onto a train with enthusiasm en route to a weekend outing. If you've lived in or visited Chicago or a surrounding town or village, chances are that you've ridden a train or bus, or spotted one passing by. Public transportation is so much a part of the culture, community, and landscape for many towns that it's easy to take for granted.

Yet transit, like so many parts of our society, has been through a lot over the last three years.

The public transit system in Northeastern Illinois and those serving other large urban areas would have collapsed — victims of the pandemic — had transit workers not gotten up each day to do their jobs so that other workers going to hospitals and factories and food stores could get to work, and had the federal government not recognized transit as essential to the nation's social and economic viability. The region learned during the pandemic that ridership alone is not the only measure of the system's value, and that there was value in moving essential workers and people making essential trips (medical, grocery shopping, childcare etc.).

Cities and large urban areas are taking a leadership role in making commitments to equity, inclusive economic growth, sustainability and resiliency. Public transit usage during the worst of the pandemic demonstrated why buses and trains are still a necessary part of our social and economic fabric. As the City of Chicago and many other communities in the region gear up for lowering transportation emissions and fostering inclusive economic growth, transit is going to be a central part of achieving these goals. Transit has survived the pandemic, but ridership — and with it, revenue from fares — sustained precipitous declines and has not returned to pre-COVID levels. Related economic shifts and other factors have resulted in a system more vulnerable to violent crime, and labor shortages have impacted every aspect of service. As a result, the transit system is not serving riders as well as it could or should. Sales taxes and federal emergency relief money will keep the region's trains and buses running into 2025, when our system encounters a fiscal cliff. Beginning in 2026, the system could face a \$730 million annual budget gap assuming current service levels are maintained regionwide.



This is nearly 20% of the annual expense budget. If the current funding model that is reliant upon fares is not changed and additional funding is not secured, the transit agencies will face an existential crisis that neither fare hikes nor service cuts can solve while preserving a useful and equitable transit system for the region.

But we know the future does not have to be so dire. The importance of transit to the region — and an unthinkable prospect of shrinking the system — has focused our region's collective minds on a plan to preserve transit and improve it for current and future riders, and a way to meet the region's larger goals on equity, climate, the economy, and more.

We're Charting the Future by Working Together

The RTA has spent the last year working with hundreds of people who ride and are passionate about our region's transit system to look at public transit in a new way, as a key link in our social infrastructure and a foundation underpinning Northeastern Illinois' massive, diversified economy. In this process, we have worked to center the voices of riders. Essential workers were consistent riders during the pandemic, having long relied on the transit system to meet their everyday needs, and within their experiences and expertise about the system lay the strategies to improving transit for everyone. We listened to input that people provided through surveys and discussions and worked to co-create the plan contents.

The Vision We Created Together

The new vision for transit that was created through this collaborative process is: Safe, reliable, accessible public transportation that connects people to opportunity, advances equity, and combats climate change.

Three core principles have guided the process of developing this plan and will be central to implementation: Equity, Committed to Change, and Stewardship.

The collective wisdom of our region's riders revealed expectations for public transit to be an agent of change in answering long-postponed regional questions of: equal access to opportunity; equitable alignment of services; and how to unify the region in a connected, safe, and reliable transportation network that leads in the fight against climate change. They see transit as the answer, and this action and advocacy plan reflects the region's diverse voices.

The region and its residents deserve a public transportation system that works better for everyone, and that is a preferred option for travel because it is efficient, affordable, and convenient. This plan envisions an unrivaled network of trains and buses across six counties that connects people to opportunity, attracts economic investment, and serves as the beating heart of an active mobility network that enhances public health and serves as our greatest resource in adapting to the impacts and fighting off future challenges of climate change. This vision is within our grasp.

We're Moving Forward with an Agenda for Advocacy and Action

Over the next five years, RTA and the Service Boards will simultaneously pursue steps toward operating and capital funding stability while also improving the system to ensure that it works better for everyone. The RTA and Service Boards can't accomplish these critical goals on our own. Leadership from the many elected officials and business and community leaders we engaged to develop this plan will be needed to make progress. The agencies recognize and appreciate that stakeholders are ready to stand with us in this pursuit. The Agenda for Advocacy and Action includes 14 priority areas that are outlined below.

- **Advocacy Area 1: Secure increased funding for transit operations.** Current funding structures, which rely heavily on rider fares, will not be enough to keep transit running at



current levels when COVID-19 relief dollars run out. The region needs diverse funding sources to ensure transit is viable for the next generation.

- **Advocacy Area 2: Develop a funding structure that is less reliant on rider fares, but instead focused on expanding access to opportunity.** Chicagoland’s public transit system contributes to our region’s economic, environmental, and social health in ways and at a scale nothing else can. Focusing on equity over ridership would free the transit agencies to explore programs that are best for riders even if they may not generate revenue, such as seamless transfers or free rides for residents experiencing low incomes.
- **Advocacy Area 3: Build a coalition around the value transit brings to the Chicago region.** The RTA will need partners from across the spectrum of businesses, riders, and more to join in a campaign to change the way our region thinks about and funds transit.
- **Advocacy Area 4: Support communities’ efforts to improve the area around their transit stations and stops and pursue equitable transit-oriented development.** Encouraging transit-friendly policies and investment in walking and biking infrastructure for the more than 200 communities within the RTA region will help improve transportation for all.
- **Advocacy Area 5: Engage with communities in an inclusive and transparent way about how transit dollars are spent in the Chicago region.** The RTA is committed to cultivating relationships between riders and transit agencies with two-way engagement that empowers communities’ role in transit decision making.
- **Advocacy Area 6: Secure increased funding for transit infrastructure.** The capital needs to maintain and improve our infrastructure are great. Sustainable funding is needed to address decades of disinvestment and respond to post-COVID rider needs. Moreover, highway and roadway agencies have historically received more money for transportation projects than transit agencies, but the economic, equity, and climate benefits of transit demand a change.
- **Advocacy Area 7: Partner with roadway agencies to build more transit-friendly streets and advance bus rapid transit.** Dedicated space on roads for Pace and CTA buses are critical to improve speed and reliability. It will take a coalition to build the political will within the highway and road agencies to implement transit-friendly streets and more bus rapid transit (BRT) in the Chicago region.
- **Action 1: Make the transit system safer and more secure for everyone.** All riders need to feel safe riding transit in the Chicago region. While the transit system is part of a larger regional ecosystem with other economic and societal trends at play, there are several steps the Service Boards can take to improve safety, work with community partners, and communicate about disruptions on the transit system.
- **Action 2: Use new funding as a catalyst to create a fully accessible transit system.** Most buses and trains on the region’s transit system are already ADA accessible, but the stations and infrastructure around transit still may create barriers for some riders. The RTA and Service Boards will continue dedicating funding toward accessibility improvements and work with partners to create accessible connections to transit.
- **Action 3: Provide more accurate, real-time travel information for riders.** Riders of fixed route and paratransit should have clear, accurate information about when and where their bus or train will arrive, regardless of schedule disruptions. While there are challenges to providing seamless information across three systems, several modes, and a large region, RTA and the Service Boards are hearing feedback about information challenges and working continuously to make improvements.
- **Action 4: Make paying for transit more seamless and more affordable.** Riding CTA, Metra, and Pace and transferring across systems should be as easy as possible. A systemwide day pass or more discounted transfers could help remove barriers to travel. In addition, reducing fares for some could also help make transit more financially accessible. The RTA and the Service Boards offer reduced fare and ride free programs for seniors and



riders with disabilities but can explore how to expand these programs to new populations including all people experiencing low incomes.

- **Action 5: Accelerate the transition to a near-zero emission regional transit system and prioritize communities burdened by poor air quality.** CTA and Pace have committed to transition their bus fleets from fossil fuels by 2040, and Metra is exploring clean technology as it becomes available, but there are steps the RTA and Service Boards can take in the short term to move those plans forward.
- **Action 6: Assess the regional capital program in a new way including considerations for racial equity and mobility justice.** For the last several years, the RTA and the Service Boards have been working together to articulate and advance a regional transit capital strategy. This moment is an opportunity to refresh the considerations that are made when projects are added to the 5-year regional capital program to address inequities, better integrate with other regional planning processes, respond to legislative mandates, and consider the input of stakeholders.
- **Action 7: Adapt bus and rail service to meet the changing needs of riders.** Transit has been and continues to be a lifeline to many riders, but COVID-19 has also changed when, where, how, and why many residents use transit. Stakeholders have told us that transit needs to be more flexible and adapt to what is needed at this moment to connect more people to opportunity. Activities underway to advance changes to the transit network include the Pace Bus Redesign, Paratransit pilot projects, Metra exploration of regional rail, and CTA's Action Plan.

As a part of that Agenda, **the agencies will work together in 2023** on a number of actions central to transit's long-term success including to:

- **Take affirmative steps forward to secure increased funding** for transit operations and make the system less reliant upon fare revenue through:
 - Executing a broad public outreach campaign of education about transit funding and continuing to engage a coalition that will secure sustainable, ongoing funding.
 - Collaborating with regional partners to identify funding options and developing revenue proposals.
 - Obtaining continued recovery ratio relief from the Illinois legislature while developing permanent funding structural reform.
- **Deliver a set of new regional transit initiatives** that will make the system better for riders including:
 - Convening a region-wide, cross-sector safety and security summit to facilitate information sharing and explore holistic solutions to the challenges affecting transit.
 - Seeking funding to pilot an expanded regional free or reduced fare program available to people experiencing low incomes to make the system more affordable and advance understanding about the barriers that fares present to riders.
 - Commissioning an independent review of the accessibility and quality of rider communication, signage, and information-sharing across and between agencies.
- **Collaboratively begin development of three regional action plans** to program investments that support a thriving region including:
 - A regional blueprint for improved accessibility that builds upon existing Service Board plans and provides a comprehensive inventory of capital

projects and supporting infrastructure improvements needed to achieve a fully accessible regional transit system.

- A regional transit climate action plan that builds upon existing Service Board plans and identifies how transit can support the region's climate action goals, outlines regional strategies that will encourage more people to ride transit, and charts a course to reduce the footprint of the transit system and move toward zero-emissions for transit operations.
- A transit-friendly communities policy, updating the RTA's *Setting the Stage for Transit* report, to set standards for communities and hold them accountable for land-use decisions and improving access to transit to ensure that our riders can travel safely and efficiently.

How to get involved

You can read more in the full draft of Transit is the Answer at www.RTACHicago.org. The draft is available for public comment from Monday, December 5, 2022, through Monday, January 9, 2023. The final plan will be graphically designed and presented to the RTA Board of Directors for adoption at its Board Meeting on February 16, 2023.

To provide public comment online, visit www.rtachicago.org/transit-is-the-answer. You can also email comments to Communications@RTACHicago.org.

Upon adoption, RTA staff will immediately begin implementation of several of the key priorities in this plan, while others are already well underway.

To take action to advance this agenda, save transit, and improve it for the future you can also:

- For Organizations: Join our **Transit is the Answer Coalition**. We will be in touch about opportunities for you to participate in plan implementation activities.
 - A partner toolkit to advocate for increased funding for transit will be available upon RTA Board consideration of this plan in February 2023.
- For Individuals: **Sign up for RTA communications** and follow RTA on social media to receive regular updates on the coalition and progress on the plan actions.

