

TRANSIT

IS THE

ANSWER

Five-Year Regional Transit Strategic Plan
Stakeholder Process and Engagement Summary Document

February 2023



Contents

About this Appendix	3
Engagement Approach	4
Big Numbers	4
Big Tent	5
<hr/>	
Guiding Principles	7
Audiences of Focus	7
Feedback Loops	8
<hr/>	
Engagement Process	10
We Listened	10
Summary of What We Heard	10
Listening Phase Outcomes	11
Listening Phase Highlights	12
We Co-Created	20
Summary of What We Heard	20
Co-Creation Phase Outcomes	20
<hr/>	
Co-Creation Phase Highlights	22
We Coalesced	25
Summary of What We Heard	25
Coalescing Phase Outcomes	25
Coalescing Phase Highlights	27
Lessons learned	36

About this Appendix

This is a supplementary document to *Transit is the Answer* outlining the engagement approach taken by the Regional Transportation Authority to develop the plan. You can find the full text of *Transit is the Answer* and other supplementary documents at <https://www.rtachicago.org/transit-is-the-answer>.



Engagement Approach

Big Numbers

20 guest bloggers and speakers

2,600+ survey responses

100+ hours of stakeholder meetings

70 organizations and more than 100 people involved in Working Groups

8 public workshops and events across 6 counties

20,000 followers engaged across social platforms



A Waukegan resident that is eager to see transit be more affordable for riders.

Big Tent

Public transit is at a critical moment. The COVID pandemic has been the biggest disruption to our region's public transit system in its history. Uncertainties around longstanding financial challenges and overarching regional issues like equity and climate change present potential pivot points for the system.

The RTA led the development process for its 2023-2028 strategic plan unlike any regionwide plan the agency had done before it — through a big tent approach that co-created the plan priorities with a diverse coalition of regional voices. The challenges facing our region's transit system are too great for any one agency or organization to tackle on their own, and the RTA believes that it is only through coalition building — mutual learning and agenda setting — that we can rise to meet the moment.

"It's not the time to be scared of change. Clearly everything is going to change, it already has changed, so we need to keep riding that momentum and think of new and innovative ways to move forward."

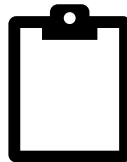
— Heidy Persaud, Director of Transportation Equity at the Center for Neighborhood Technology, during RTA's panel called "Emerging from Crisis Wiser, Reimagining Regional Transit" as part of Urban Transportation Center at the University of Illinois-Chicago 2021 Fall Seminar Series

The RTA is committed to change. In past strategic planning processes, the RTA has typically worked closely with state, county, and local transportation agencies, as well as planners and leadership at the Chicago Transit Authority (CTA), Metra, and Pace to set regional priorities and engaged a broader stakeholder group at periodic points along the process of plan development. This time needed to be different — the RTA knew it needed to broaden the conversation to more organizations and to the public, and to build in ongoing opportunities for a big tent of perspectives from across the region to work together on the plan's vision, values, and actions.

Online Surveys



Pop-ups



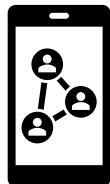
Presentations



Blog Posts



Social Media



1-on-1 Meetings



Public Board Meetings



Panel Discussions



Building upon years of meaningful engagement work led by its Community Planning program team — which offers technical assistance and funding to address local planning needs that intersect public transportation and land use — the RTA casted a wider outreach net and designed a robust engagement strategy to listen, co-create, and coalesce the strategic plan.



Over 16 months of conversations and collaborative work with thousands of members of the public, transit planners, transit riders, community groups, elected officials, advocacy groups, business leaders, and other important stakeholders, the RTA has laid the foundation for a diverse coalition of people and organizations willing to stand up for transit and help implement the plan.

This Strategic Plan Engagement Report describes the RTA's engagement work and what we heard.

"It's a good time to approach planning with humility and openness. Planning culture is a lot of calculations and forecasts, but this is a time to be humble about what we do or don't know."

— David Bragdon, Executive Director of TransitCenter, during RTA's panel called "Emerging from Crisis Wiser, Reimagining Regional Transit" as part of Urban Transportation Center at the University of Illinois-Chicago 2021 Fall Seminar Series



Guiding Principles

RTA's engagement strategy was informed by two long-standing, guiding agency principles: transparency and accountability. The RTA has demonstrated its commitment to transparency through investments like RTAMS, the agency's mapping and statistics website, which makes extensive data resources about the six-county metropolitan Chicago region's transit system, publicly available. The agency has demonstrated its commitment to accountability, through activities such as prioritizing an effective Citizens Advisory Board (RTACAB) who actively advise the RTA Board of Directors and staff on issues related to the coordination of accessible public transportation services across the region, the provision and efficiency of other regional transportation programs, and the impact of the RTA's policies and programs on the communities within the metropolitan region.

When it came to designing the engagement strategy and approach, the RTA started by articulating specific ways it would deliver on transparency and accountability. Along the way, the engagement process helped truly deepen and refine what transparency and accountability mean for the RTA.

Transparency

- **Keep it Simple:** Design engagement touchpoints to be simple and accessible.
- **Be Consistent:** Create a cadence to the engagement strategy that is regular and consistent.
- **Reveal Process:** Be clear about how input will be used and decisions will be made.

Accountability

- **Create Feedback Loops:** Reflect back out the input received along the way.
- **Manage Expectations:** Provide detailed information about what stakeholders can expect.
- **Don't Overpromise:** Anchor engagement touchpoints in the realities of decision making.
- **Stay Flexible:** Be responsive to what emerges along the way.

Audiences of Focus

Four audiences of focus were identified to inform the engagement approach, in terms of delineating the cadence, level, and content of engagement for each group.

1. **Impacted public** represented current and lapsed riders, and residents of the six-county region the RTA serves. This group focused on those who are closest to transit and transit decisions across the region and have critically important lived experience, though not always deep technical transit planning knowledge. They were actively



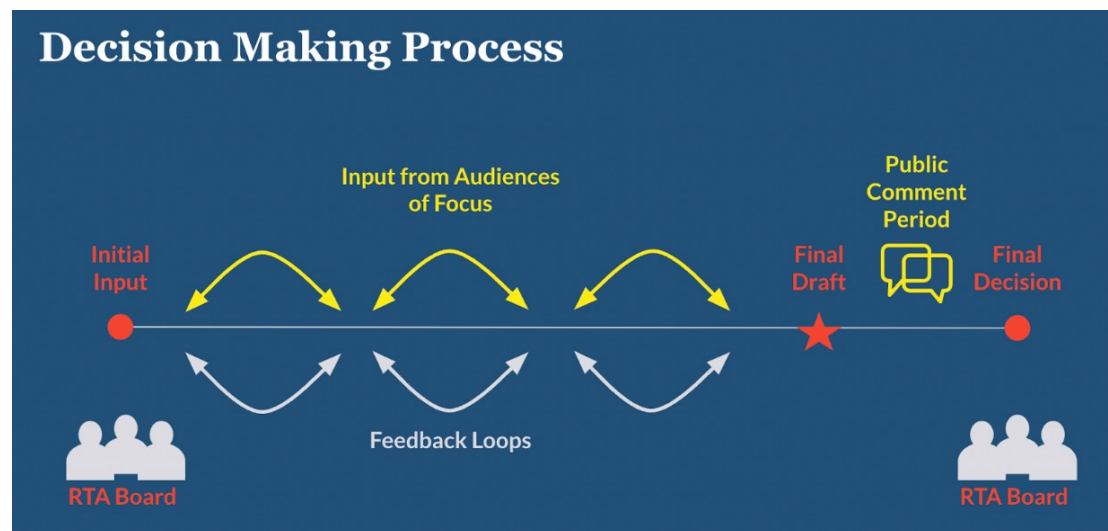
engaged across the planning process with a particular focus on asynchronous and in-person pop up engagement opportunities with clear ways for them to weigh in and follow progress.

2. **Movers** were composed of regional and local planners, advocates, academics, chambers of commerce members, and local business staff. They were engaged in advance of decision points, through one-on-one conversations, regular meetings, and planning workshops. Movers offered both lived experience and subject matter expertise. Their buy-in and insight were important to shaping the strategic plan.
3. **Influencers** were defined as the RTA leadership and staff, Service Board leadership and staff, and elected officials. This group helped shape priorities from the public and Movers into an actionable agenda that transportation agencies and elected officials can work together to implement in the coming years.
4. **Decision makers** are members of the RTA Board of Directors and as such will ultimately affirm this plan through formal adoption. The decision makers were provided with regular updates during RTA Board meetings and participated in other engagement opportunities over the course of the planning process.

Throughout the process, the RTA was keen to deepen relationships with long term partners, expand its network and build new relationships, and reach out to critics to reconcile and rebuild important connections. The central intent of this region-wide planning effort was to align and position a coalition for region-wide implementation.

Feedback Loops

The RTA was intentional about creating consistent feedback loops throughout the engagement process. At each strategic plan decision point, the RTA sought input from its audiences of focus. This input was then summarized and shared back out, so contributors could understand what was heard and how the RTA integrated their ideas and suggestions. The RTA's Connections blog offered frequent updates on the strategic planning process, while each post was promoted in regular newsletters from Executive Director Leanne Redden and on the RTA's social media channels.



Early conceptual sketch of the decision-making process and feedback loops that informed the engagement strategy.

Strategic plan-related *Connections* blog posts:

- [August 18, 2021: RTA kicks off next Regional Transit Strategic Plan process](#)
- [September 1, 2021: RTA Board weighs in on priorities as strategic planning begins](#)
- [September 17, 2021: Guest speakers on outreach, inclusion begin Making a Plan engagement effort](#)
- [October 21, 2021: RTA Board hears from guest speakers on transit system adaptation](#)
- [November 16, 2021: Public forum focuses on lessons from the pandemic in planning for transit's future](#)
- [January 6, 2022: RTA Board hears from guest speakers on how to ensure accessible and financially sustainable future for transit](#)
- [February 17, 2022: RTA releases strategic plan survey results, seeks feedback on emerging vision](#)
- [March 7, 2022: Survey responses explore value of transit beyond ridership, help inform emerging strategic plan vision](#)
- [May 5, 2022: RTA convenes stakeholder working groups to discuss strategic plan goals, strategies, and metrics](#)
- [August 18, 2022: RTA Strategic Plan Stakeholder Working Groups conclude, discuss priority recommendations for 2023 Agenda for Advocacy and Action](#)
- [September 8, 2022: RTA engages with riders at community events, publishes survey to hear from you on future of transit](#)
- [October 17, 2022: Strategic plan engagement sheds light on value of transit, add your voice to survey open now](#)

Another opportunity to stay abreast of the planning process, was through regular updates presented by RTA staff to the RTA Board of Directors during their monthly meetings. Each Board meeting adhered to Illinois Open Meeting Act guidelines, was lived streamed, and was posted and remains viewable on the RTA's YouTube channel.

Being consistent about creating feedback loops at every stage of the engagement process was an important way RTA could be accountable to its many contributors.



Engagement Process

Transit is the Answer was developed over 16 months starting in August of 2021 and going through December 2022. The engagement process had three phases where we listened, we co-created, and we coalesced.

We Listened

Between August 2021 and March 2022, the RTA heard from more than a thousand people across all audiences of focus. The goal of the listening phase, which was originally referred to as “Making a Plan,” was to gather and share initial input on the priorities, challenges, and opportunities that the plan should address. This phase included multiple, wide-ranging touchpoints including a guest blog series from transit thinkers around the region, a public forum held with the University of Illinois-Chicago, guest speakers at the RTA Board of Directors meetings, stakeholder workshops, and a public survey that received more than 1,000 responses. Full results from the survey are [available online](#).

“When we reached out to communities it wasn’t so much to make sure they understood who we are, but to listen, understand, and ask them what they want us to know about them, their communities, and their work. That is what I consider a more authentic kind of engagement, listening more than talking.”

— Debra Shore, Commissioner on the Board of the Chicago Metropolitan Water Reclamation District, during her presentation to the September 2021 RTA Board Meeting

Summary of What We Heard

Below are a sample of responses to open-ended input questions asked during this phase of engagement:

What is currently the greatest opportunity for impact that the strategic plan process should address?

- Continue to invest in strengthening the system by bringing stations, tracks, vehicles, and other infrastructure to a state of good repair.
- Leverage transit as a tool for climate action by both getting more people out of cars and onto transit and through green transit initiatives such as bus electrification.
- Take a rider-centered approach by making transit easier to use and by communicating the planning process and its outcomes transparently.



What types of transit system changes should be the focus of this process?

- Increase the system's flexibility to better serve destinations outside of downtown Chicago and hours outside of the traditional commute.
- Better integrate and coordinate fares between the CTA, Metra, and Pace.
- Improve speed, reliability, and overall quality of service.
- Ensure all riders feel safe on transit.

Which key financial issues should be addressed through this process?

- Pursue additional funding sources for transit.
- Rely less on fares for transit operations by rethinking how the system is funded.
- Find new ways to communicate the value of transit.

What are some productive ways for RTA to define, understand, and incorporate equity during this process?

- Prioritize access for those who need it most, for example by income, employment, and race.
- Seek to remedy inequities in the transit system caused by historical and current structural racism by using race as a factor when measuring progress.
- Advocate for increased federal and state funding to leverage transit's inherent advantage in providing equitable access to opportunity compared to other modes of transportation.

Listening Phase Outcomes

Engagement during the listening phase defined the vision, outcomes, and principles of the plan. These elements were used to hone the approach and key questions asked in later phases of the process. Before moving forward, we shared a draft of the vision, outcomes, and principles with the RTA Board, Movers group and the public, and refined based on feedback. The finalized vision, outcomes, and principles are below.

Vision

Safe, reliable, accessible public transportation that connects people to opportunity, advances equity, and combats climate change.

Plan Outcomes

In the future our region's transit system will be:

- Safe, accessible, reliable, and useful for riders
- In a state of good repair
- Financially stable

In the future our region will be:

- Connected
- Winning the fight against climate change
- Thriving



Plan Principles

- Commit to change
- Equity
- Stewardship

Listening Phase Highlights

Strategic Planning Kickoff Workshop with the RTA's Board of Directors

Audience(s) of Focus	Decision makers
Board of Directors	16

In August of 2021, the RTA kicked off the strategic planning process with a workshop with its Board of Directors, where staff engaged members representing the city of Chicago and the six counties of Northeastern Illinois served by the RTA by offering feedback on the importance of supporting a strong, financially stable transit system that will serve the region well in the coming years. The meeting adhered to all guidelines of the state's Open Meetings Act, as is always followed for RTA Board of Directors meetings. The Board also discussed priorities, such as climate and equity that need to be addressed.

The RTA's Board of Directors gave early input on the key topics that should be addressed in the strategic plan, including the following questions:

- What is the greatest opportunity for impact right now that the Strategic Plan process should address?
- What types of transit system changes should be the focus of this process?
- Which key financial issues should be addressed through the process?
- What are some productive ways for RTA to define, understand, and incorporate equity during this process?
- Who would you as the RTA Board like to hear more directly from during this process?

The Directors were clear that engagement should be robust and ongoing and seek input from a wide range of stakeholders including riders, elected officials, civic and advocacy groups, employees of the Service Boards, and members of the public.

Guest bloggers and guest presenters at 2021 Board of Directors meetings

The following section describes more detail about engagement through invited guest speakers and writers at RTA Board of Directors meetings and on the RTA blog, Connections:

Audience(s) of Focus	Decision Makers, Influencers, Movers
Guest Bloggers & Speakers	20

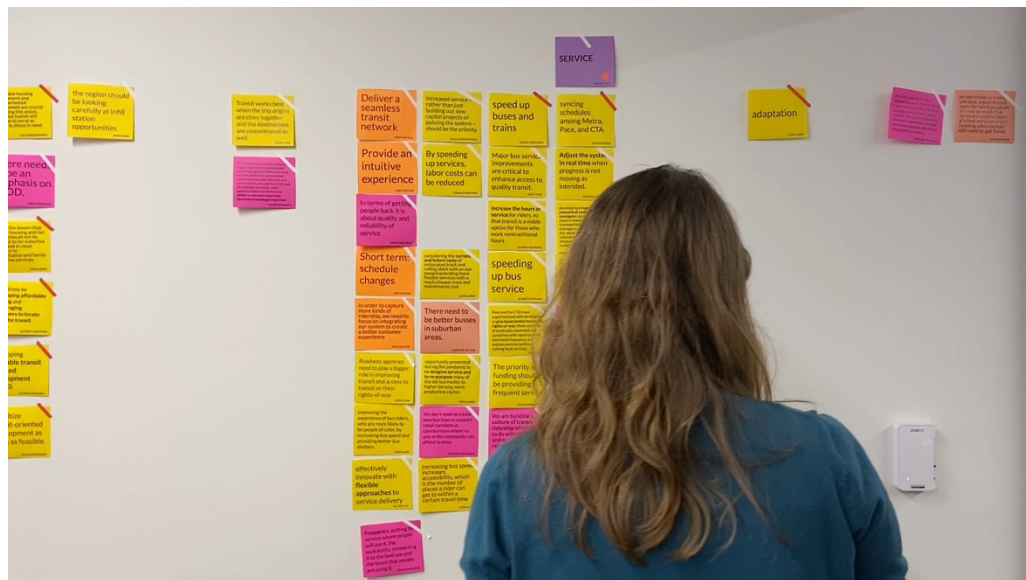
The RTA invited leading transit voices, regionally and nationally, to share their perspectives on transit and provide the RTA with key insight for the planning process. Presenters and guest bloggers came from a variety of industries including advocacy, academia, and transit service providers. Topics included the importance of inclusive engagement, innovation and technology, sustainability, and creating accessible and financially sustainable transit systems, among others. Presentations and blogs were open to the public and remain freely available. Hearing from subject matter experts on the challenges and opportunities within transit provided key context and best practices for the plan. The individual and unstructured format allowed presenters to provide nuanced, thorough input.



Guest blog posts:

- September 1, 2021: Guest blogger Julia Gerasimenko of the Active Transportation Alliance envisions green, affordable multimodal transportation
- September 30, 2021: Guest blogger Yonah Freemark of the Urban Institute discusses the future of the Chicago region's transit system
- October 5, 2021: Guest blogger Oboi Reed of Equiticity and Transportation Equity Network calls on the transit system to reckon with racial equity and mobility justice
- October 7, 2021: Guest blogger Edith Makra of the Metropolitan Mayors Caucus says public transit is vital for climate change adaptation
- October 12, 2021: Guest blogger Tom Kotarac of the Civic Committee of the Commercial Club of Chicago says now is the time to rethink the transit status quo
- October 19, 2021: Guest blogger from Ya-Ting Liu of Via Transportation weighs in how tech innovation can help create 'Public Transit 2.0'
- October 26, 2021: Guest blogger from John Loper from DuPage County discusses need for regional mobility improvements
- November 2, 2021: Guest blogger, UIC Professor Kate Lowe suggests radical rethinking of transit's future
- November 10, 2021: Guest blogger Audrey Wennink from the Metropolitan Planning Council says transit can be a public health, equity solution
- November 30, 2021: Guest blogger from Kevin Considine of Lake County Partners encourages collaboration for a transit system that supports regional economic development
- December 7, 2021: Guest blogger from Jesse Elam of the Cook County Department of Transportation and Highways weighs in on how RTA can balance transit's current needs and future opportunities
- January 10, 2022: Guest blogger from Yousef Salama at the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning encourages collaboration, new ideas for the future of transit
- January 13, 2022: Guest blogger and community activist Rochelle Jackson from the North Lawndale Community Coordinating Council says everyone needs transportation options
- January 25, 2022: CTA top planner says equity will be at the core of agency's future
- January 25, 2022: Metra leader says funding is key to improved operations, climate goals
- January 25, 2022: Pace leader says innovation is essential for future of transit





RTA Director of Planning and Market Development Jessica Hector-Hsu reviewing input that emerged from the listening phase.

Guest speakers at RTA Board of Directors meetings:

- Dr. Judy Shanley, Assistant Vice President, Easterseals Education and Youth Transition Programs; and Partner Director at National Center for Mobility Management
- Jim Aloisi, former Secretary of Transportation of Massachusetts, and current lecturer at MIT
- Benjamin de la Peña, CEO of the Chicago-based Shared-Use Mobility Center
- Jody Holton, Assistant General Manager, Planning at the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority or SEPTA
- Debra Shore, Commissioner on the Board of the Chicago Metropolitan Water Reclamation District
- Tanya Adams, Vice President of Inclusion and Diversity and Community Relations and Equity Manager at WSP USA; and chair of the National Board of Directors for the Conference of Minority Transportation Officials or COMTO

Strategic Plan Public Survey #1 on initial priorities and vision

Audience(s) of Focus	Impacted Public, Movers
Survey Responses	1,785

The RTA Strategic Plan Public Survey was open from November 11, 2021, to February 4, 2022. More than 1,000 people took the survey, with the vast majority identifying as general public or transit riders and others identifying as government or transit agency employees in the region. **The survey showed** respondents' desires for a more flexible, reliable transit system, which helped inform the plan's emerging vision. When asked to describe their vision for the future of the region's transit system in three words, respondents' common responses included reliable, accessible, and safe.

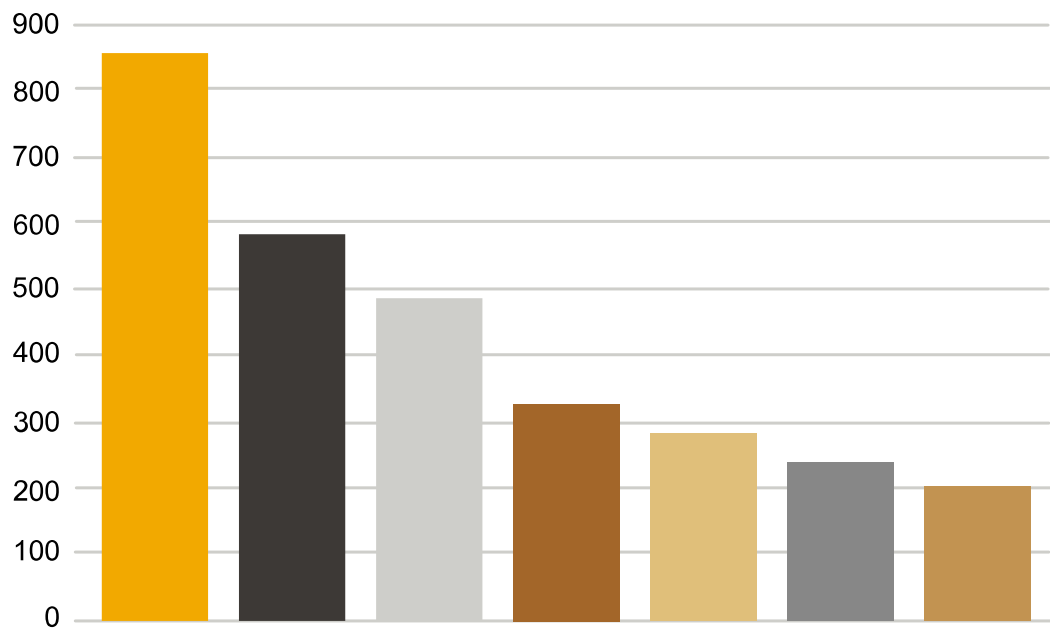




Top words that survey respondents used to describe their vision for the future of the region's transit system.

When asked which changes to the transit system the RTA should prioritize in the future, the most common survey response was "Creating a more flexible transit system that better serves destinations outside of downtown Chicago and hours outside of the traditional AM/PM commutes."

Of possible changes to the transit system, which of these options should the RTA prioritize?



Responses

- Creating a more flexible transit system that better serves destinations outside of downtown Chicago and hours outside of the traditional AM/PM commutes.
- Taking a regional approach to investing in transit infrastructure in order to adapt to changing needs for how people want to get around the region.
- Improving fare integration – e.g., Improved transfers, one fare card for all transit systems (Metra, CTA, and Pace)
- Investing in sidewalks and other strategies to make accessing transit stations and stops safer and easier.



- Strengthening regional policies to locate job opportunities in places that can more easily be served by transit.
- Piloting reduced or free fares for certain populations of riders.
- Returning to pre-COVID service levels.

The RTA has distributed \$3.4 billion in federal relief funds to CTA, Metra, and Pace to keep transit running during the pandemic. Those funds will sustain transit through much of 2025, but difficult financial decisions are ahead. A majority of respondents to the public survey (86 percent) expressed a desire to find new funding sources rather than cut service in order live within austere budgets in the future.

In the future, if COVID relief funding runs out before ridership fully recovers, the transit system should



Responses

- Pursue additional funding sources for transit.
- Scale back service to “live within its means.”

Movers Workshop #1 (Jan 22)

Audience(s) of Focus	Impacted Public, Movers
Participants	125

On January 26, 2022, the RTA hosted a virtual workshop to hear from key audiences of focus on what issues mattered most to them. Through an interactive session, with multiple breakout groups, participants identified transit system issues with the highest sense of urgency, including safety, reliability, sustainable funding sources, equity, accessibility, climate mitigation, and state of good repair. With suburb-to-suburb service, fare integration, and land use near transit stops having a lower sense of urgency. The RTA also invited new ideas for measuring transit access across the region. Its traditional access measure — access of all people to all jobs during the weekday morning peak — was limited and did not integrate an equity lens. When asked what other dimensions of access it should consider tracking, participants suggested the following:

- Age of transit riders
- Racial demographics (equity) of transit riders



- Destinations
- Modes of travel
- Costs of travel
- Travel time
- Consistency
- Accessibility
- Service levels
- Coverage of service
- Economic outcomes (like types of jobs and wages)

Finally, workshop participants weighed in on how the RTA should track its stewardship of public resources. Traditionally, the RTA has demonstrated its fiscal stewardship using the mandated farebox recovery ratio — which requires half of the cost of operating the region’s transit system come from revenue generated by the agencies, primarily through fare collection. Participants suggested many ideas for measuring the stewardship of public resources, including the following:

- Equitable distribution of resources
- Diversity of funding sources
- Reliability of infrastructure and equipment
- Coverage of service
- Fare integration and lower fares
- Rider experience
- Value creation for the region
- Transparency

The Movers Workshop culminated with a call for nominations for strategic planning working group members, which kicked off in the Co-Creation Phase.

Urban Transportation Center Public Forum

Audience(s) of Focus	Impacted Public, Movers
Real-time Participants	Approximately 100

Hosted by the Urban Transportation Center at the University of Illinois-Chicago as part of its Fall Seminar Series, “Emerging from Crisis Wiser, Reimagining Regional Transit,” brought together panelists with local and national perspectives to contemplate the challenges and opportunities facing public transit. The panel discussion was the first public event in the RTA’s strategic plan engagement effort aimed at gathering input from a wide range of voices.

RTA Director of Planning and Market Development Jessica Hector-Hsu moderated the panel with Heidi Persaud, Director of Transportation Equity at the Center for Neighborhood Technology, Bethany Williams, Strategy & Intelligence Director at Lake County Partners, and David Bragdon, Executive Director of TransitCenter.



Panelists discussed how the past 20 months — including COVID-19, social justice movements, and increased attention on the importance of climate change — have changed perspectives on public transit. “It has sharpened and deepened our views about things that we instinctively knew,” said David Bragdon. He said transit agencies need to focus on frequency and reliability of service, walkability, land use and employment decisions, all of which were important before the pandemic as well.

Similarly, Bethany Williams said that the last two years have highlighted the confluence of policy issues like transit, housing, education, equity, and the economy — and that the solutions will also need to cross policy boundaries. “The pandemic illuminated a lot of cracks and fissures that were there already and exacerbated them. I’m seeing a lot more interest in unraveling these public policy hairballs that seem to reinforce themselves unless you look at intersectional solutions to some of these problems.”

When working toward those solutions, Heidi Persaud highlighted the importance of partnering with and listening to communities that are most affected. She said the pandemic and social justice advocacy of 2020 and 2021 has made it imperative that community groups are at the table, are fairly compensated, and have their voices heard. The panelists also encouraged the RTA and transit agencies not to shy away from innovation and difficult decisions as part of the next regional transit strategic plan.

This public conversation really set the stage for RTA’s strategic planning process.

Strategic Plan Public Survey #2 for public comment on the emerging vision

Audience(s) of Focus	Impacted Public, Movers, Influencers
Survey Responses	260

The RTA Strategic Plan Public Survey #2 was open from February 16, 2021, to March 11, 2022. After six months of listening, the RTA circulated an emerging vision statement, principles, and suggested outcomes for the plan for public comment through its second plan-related public input survey. Full results from the survey are [available online](#).

Here is a summary of themes that surfaced across answers to the question “Aside from ridership, how should the RTA measure the value that the transit system creates?”

Safe, reliable, accessible public transportation

Several survey responses said the value of transit is in providing safe, reliable, accessible public transportation for the people of northeastern Illinois, including the following quotes.

- “RTA should measure the value of the transit system by looking at how accessible and reliable it is. A system that cannot be depended upon by all riders to provide safe, accessible and on-time transportation is not a valuable system for anyone.”
- “By the number of new riders willing to get on board because they feel safe.”
- “Accessibility – whether folks are able to get where they need to go in a reasonable amount of time, and make sure that transit comes at a reliable frequency”
- “Percentage of people that have reliable transit options within 1 mile of their origin and destination point. Hours of service availability”
- “The transit system should be able to connect all area residents to jobs, essential services, and other transportation nodes within a reasonable amount of time in order to encourage use of transit for all trips that cannot be completed on foot. It would be important to highlight environmental, health, and economic outcomes derived from transit use over car ownership and use.”

Connecting people to opportunity

Several responses said the value of transit is the way it connects people to opportunity.



- “Access to jobs, services, education, and other destinations people need for opportunity and autonomy.”
- “The value should be based on how many low-income riders are connected to a job or educational opportunity.”
- “Creates the opportunity for people to live in affordable areas and work where there are good jobs.”
- “How much of the area does it connect—how easy it is to get from areas not in downtown Chicago to other areas not in downtown Chicago? How reliable is the transit system—how long are wait times, and how much can someone rely on getting where they’re going if they miss a bus?”
- “Number of locations available within a safe 10-minute walk from a public transport stop. Eg, downtowns, corporate corridors, public attractions.”

Empowers equity

Several responses said the value of transit is in the way it advances equity in northeastern Illinois.

- “Equity for disabled riders.”
- “Demographics of riders served, contribution to enhancing accessibility in low and moderate income Black and Brown communities.”
- “Equity and accessibility – not just how many riders but is the distribution of those riders reflective of our communities actual economic, racial, geographic, etc distribution. A million riders means nothing if they all come from a limited number of communities where access is superior.”
- “Creating equitable service levels (frequency, reliability, hours of service) for all communities.”

Combats climate change

Several responses said the value of transit is in its ability to combat climate change.

- “How using a flexible, affordable, accessible system benefits the climate.”
- “Impact on the environment — every car taken off the road makes a tremendous impact on reducing emissions and energy. Reducing cars also reduces traffic, improving everyone’s commute and reducing load on road infrastructure.”
- “The RTA should measure the value that the transit system creates by the greenhouse gas emissions and automobile congestion it alleviates to show the benefits a reliable regional transit system has on non-riders to advocate for a new public operating funding revenue stream aside from the sales tax.”
- “By either the reduced carbon footprint of choosing transit over driving, or by a reduction in VMT of private cars on major roads. Consider that driving should not ever be considered the “default mode of transit” to compare public transport ridership with.”
- “Perhaps by estimating how many tons of greenhouse gases are kept out of the atmosphere by the transit system.”

When survey respondents were asked for their vision for the future of the region’s public transit system, in three words, they responded with some of these clear ideas:

- “Win public back”



- “Easy metro mobility”
- “accessible, affordable, equitable”
- “Accessible to all”
- “safe, reliable, sustainable”

RTA staff used the input from the survey to further refine the vision, principles, and outcomes before presenting final versions to the RTA Board in March 2022.

We Co-Created

The listening phase made clear that *Transit is the Answer* needed to leverage the region to solve problems that RTA was unable to tackle on its own, and to continue engaging a diverse range of stakeholders to embody the principles of the plan: stewardship, commitment to change, and equity. To that end, RTA launched three stakeholder working groups in April 2022 which ran through early July 2022. The working groups dove into major topics of the plan and provided recommended goals, strategies, and performance measures. At the end of the working group process, the RTA hosted a Movers Workshop to share out on priority actions that emerged and garner feedback from a wider audience.

In addition to the stakeholder working groups, the RTA convened two Technical Working Groups tasked with developing detailed portions of the next regional transit strategic plan. These groups -- the 10-Year-Financial Plan group and the Priority Project group – were made up of staff from the RTA, CTA, Metra, Pace, and the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP). For purposes of this report, the engagement summary primarily covers work of the Stakeholder Working Groups. Work of the Technical Working Groups can also be found on the [Working Group Hub](#).

Summary of What We Heard

The Working Group process generated a total of 28 goals and 131 strategies that were recommended for inclusion in the RTA’s strategic plan. Details about what each working group proposed to the RTA can be found in their corresponding memos attached as an appendix to *Transit is the Answer*.

Co-Creation Phase Outcomes

Working Group Recommendation Memos

Each working group — Transit Service, Infrastructure Investment, and Financial Responsibility — produced a memo summarizing their work and recommendations. The memos are included as fellow attachments to *Transit is the Answer*.

Plan Principle Definitions & Key Discussion Questions

Defining the principles of Equity, Stewardship and Committed to Change was critical to guiding the discussions, developing strategies, and ultimately achieving the outcomes. To ensure working group discussion and ideas were aligned with the three principles of *Transit is the Answer*, the RTA drafted definitions as well as assessment questions that the working group members and facilitators could use to strengthen ideas, strategies, and proposals.

Equity

Advancing equity through the Strategic Plan means that the planning process will acknowledge, identify, and seek to change policymaking, planning, and distribution of resources to better meet the transit needs of historically underinvested and overburdened



people and communities in our region across agencies, community types, and political boundaries.

Our working definition of equity begins with racial equity by improving transit options and outcomes for people and communities of color as well as people who:

- Are from low-income households
- Possess limited English proficiency
- Have a disability
- Are Seniors

Key questions for working group members to consider:

- Who would benefit from the implementation of this regional goal or idea?
- Would any people, group, or community with experiences or identities on the list above be left out or be disproportionately burdened by the costs or effects of this idea or the implementation of this strategy? If so, how do we adjust it to include and/or unburden them?
- What is the collective regional benefit if we pursue equity in this way?

Stewardship

Being good stewards of the Chicago region's transit system means that we are committed to using public funding wisely and maximizing our shared resources.

In seeking to be stewards, we will continually consider how the Strategic Plan process will ensure the financial health of the transit agencies while also advancing the purpose of transit as a public good, regional economic development catalyst, and tool for climate action.

Key questions for working group members to consider:

- What would it cost the region (e.g., financial resources, political resources, etc.) to pursue this goal or idea? What would be some of the benefits?
- Could this goal or idea be accomplished using existing resources or would it overextend the region's (or RTA's) financial resources in absence of a trade-off?
- What additional funding sources might be required to realize this idea?
- What is the collective good accomplished through this goal or idea?

Committed to Change

Public transit is the core of the region's mobility network. Being committed to change means that the Strategic Plan will acknowledge that the mobility needs of the region are changing rapidly while many long-standing community mobility needs and expectations for transit are still unmet.

In committing to change, the Strategic Plan process will empower the transit agencies and systems to adapt, innovate, and re-think regional transit options to better meet the needs of people and communities we serve across the region today and into the future.

Key questions for working group members to consider:

- What changing mobility needs or expectations in the region does this goal or idea address?
- What types of changes would this idea require the RTA, and/or Service Boards, or other stakeholders to make?



- What are the barriers or challenges to making this change? What is needed to overcome them? Where is there political will for this goal or idea?

Co-Creation Phase Highlights

The following recaps how the RTA co-created major parts of the strategic plan through the working group process.

Strategic Planning Stakeholder Working Groups

The RTA stood up stakeholder working groups to provide a forum for stakeholders to work together to apply the plan principles toward developing specific goals and actions that could be taken to move the region toward the outcomes established in the listening phase. The RTA was committed to creating an environment in which collaborative dialogue, learning, and problem-solving occurred among agency staff, stakeholders with whom RTA interacts regularly and others who may not have been a part of RTA planning activities in the past. This level of region-wide engagement was new to the RTA and was a demonstration of its commitment to change.

Each working group was made up of 30-40 members of diverse backgrounds and experiences to create a forum for mutual learning and discussion, develop content recommendations for the plan, and to cultivate a group of stakeholders that are knowledgeable about transit issues and invested in potential solutions to support implementation. Groups included members from CTA, Metra, and Pace, the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, city and county governments, non-profit organizations and advocacy groups, representatives of the disability community, community-based organizations, and transit riders.

Table 1: Descriptions of Three Stakeholder Working Groups and Outcomes of Focus

Working Group 1 Transit Service	Working Group 2 Infrastructure Investment	Working Group 3 Financial Responsibility
<p>Focused on the quality of transit service and the rider experience and related implications for the transit system as a tool to impact regional climate change. This group worked toward goals, strategies, and performance measures to address the following two plan outcomes.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A transit system that is safe, accessible, reliable, and useful for riders — How do we create a more seamless rider experience? • A region that is winning the fight against climate change — How can we best leverage transit as 	<p>Focused on infrastructure investments that are needed on the transit system itself and in communities around stations and stops to make transit more accessible and appealing. This group worked toward goals, strategies, and performance measures to address the following two plan outcomes.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A transit system that is in a state of good repair — How do we maximize benefits of infrastructure investment and use limited resources effectively to maintain the system today while planning for tomorrow? • A region of thriving communities — How do we work with 	<p>Focused on the balance between financial efficiency and transit system coverage to achieve a transit system that is financially stable and effective in connecting people to opportunity. This group worked toward goals, strategies, and performance measures to address the following two plan outcomes.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A transit system that is financially stable — How do we find new balance in funding so that the transit system can continue to operate while also remaining affordable for riders? • A region that is connected — How can we connect people and communities to more



**Working Group 1
Transit Service**

a tool for regional climate action?

**Working Group 2
Infrastructure Investment**

communities to improve access to transit and support equitable development around transit?

**Working Group 3
Financial Responsibility**

opportunities to improve their quality of life?

The three working groups each met six times over the course of 12 weeks. Each meeting was two-hours long and included a full group presentation and breakout sessions for brainstorming and ideation. Two RTA staff facilitated each working group, and each working group had two sponsors from RTA leadership. Each breakout group had a notetaker or scribe to ensure that all comments were recorded, and participants were encouraged to participate in real-time using tools like Google documents and Menti. Participants who were unable to attend the session or needed more time to fully participate had opportunities to do so asynchronously. Additionally, all materials were on screen-reader-compatible formats, and breakout group members were able to provide feedback both verbally and in writing. Other accommodations (such as captioning services) were made available upon request.

To ensure that all participants were able to engage fully, and were compensated appropriately for their contributions, RTA provided stipends for participation to anyone who requested it. These stipends were at the same estimated rate as the hourly compensation for external consultants working on the project.

All three of the working groups had similar cadences; of brainstorming and refining over time. To ensure that discussions could maintain breadth and depth, breakout groups stayed the same for each brainstorm and refinement cycle and changed when moving to the next cycle.

- Meeting 1: Welcome, introduction, and key context
- Meeting 2: Brainstorming goals
- Meeting 3: Refining goals
- Meeting 4: Brainstorming strategies
- Meeting 5: Refining and discussing strategies
- Meeting 6: Discussing performance measures

Following each meeting, the RTA made all documents that were used to capture ideas during breakout groups available for several days following the meetings to allow for additional comments. RTA also worked to synthesize and refine ideas between meeting to aid in the group's collective progress. To ensure that all comments were accounted for, the RTA used inductive analysis; using a virtual whiteboard to group or theme like comments together before categorizing into goal or strategy statements. As much as possible, RTA kept the working group member's original words throughout the process.

Detailed progress of each working group was housed on an **online Hub** which was updated weekly to include meeting materials (including PowerPoint slides, meeting summaries, links to Google documents from the meeting, and feedback forms). Working group members were encouraged to use the Hub to access any information or next steps from each meeting. Having one, publicly available, source of information ensured that RTA maintained its commitment to accountability and transparency.

Working group members were invited to complete a feedback form to weigh in about their satisfaction with the meeting format, facilitation, and any additional comments they had about the process. Responses were reviewed by the RTA who adapted to feedback and addressed concerns in the following meetings.



In addition to the generation of strategies and goals for the strategic plan, one of the primary goals of the working group was to demonstrate the RTA's commitment to change and to build a coalition of engaged, informed stakeholders to hold the organization accountable to the continued process of engagement moving forward. To achieve this, RTA had to foster a sense of mutual learning. Each meeting included a community ritual that was designed to foster camaraderie in the virtual setting. Some meeting rituals were done with the whole group while others were completed in the breakout groups. Additionally, RTA invited working group members to give short presentations on their areas of expertise and when working group members needed additional information, guest presenters were invited to share critical context and information.

Working Group Codes of Conduct

All participants are invited to engage in respectful, constructive dialogue, active listening, and mutual learning. Participants will be held accountable to following codes of conduct for the duration of the Working Group process.

- Bring a collaborative spirit.
- Challenge the system, be kind to the people.
- Balance a sense of urgency with patience in the process.
- Show up as a whole person and speak honestly, from your personal and professional perspectives.
- Recognize (y)our own privilege and power and center the experience of those most marginalized and reliant upon transit.
- Be willing to respectfully disagree with yourself and others over time.
- Be aware of the time and space you occupy to ensure that others also have opportunities to share their views.
- Assume good intentions of others while at the same time being aware and accountable of the potential negative impact of words and actions whether intended or not.
- Acknowledge and challenge assumptions—your own and others.'
- Show up and participate, as often and regularly as possible. When you can't attend, communicate with the organizers and/or send your alternate.
- Be willing to do the upfront pre-work so that meetings can be more productive.
- Be willing to act as a liaison between those in the working group and those with whom we live and work to impart mutual learning and build external support for change.
- Actively participate as a member of the group and support RTA and fellow working group participants in the process of creating solutions together.

The RTA commits to these codes of conduct, as well as the following:

- Create an environment in which collaborative dialogue, learning, and problem-solving can occur among agency staff, stakeholders with whom RTA interacts regularly and others who may not have been a part of RTA planning activities in the past.
- Aim to hear from everyone who would like to provide input into this process by taking the time, space, and outreach initiative to make it possible for people who would like to constructively contribute to do so.



- Commit to change by being willing to take risks within what the RTA is able to accomplish, understanding that we work within a system that presents both opportunities and limitations.
- Invite and receive feedback with a learning mindset.
- Listen to understand first (and then respond).
- Willing to acknowledge RTA's past mistakes and learn from them.
- Being transparent about RTA's role and decision-making processes.

We Coalesced

After months of working together to develop recommended 28 goals, 131 strategies, and draft performance measures, the Strategic Planning Working Groups concluded. It was time for the RTA to consider the recommendations and coalesce a set of priorities. To do so, RTA reflected on (1) which goals and strategies had the greatest sense of urgency and collective energy from working group members; and (2) what was most practical to act on immediately following plan adoption in 2023. This final phase of the strategic planning process centered around 14 priority goals in the RTA's 2023 Agenda for Advocacy and Action. The RTA socialized this agenda through a series of in-person pop-ups engaging transit riders and residents across the region, roadshow presentations, meetings with Service Board staff and leadership, and the final public input survey.

Garnering input from hundreds of stakeholders during the Coalescing Phase, the RTA used this feedback to develop the draft strategic plan, which was open for public comment from December 2022 through early January 2023.

Summary of What We Heard

A few quotes received during this stage of input include:

- "Transit is the best way forward into a future of greater equity, lower emissions, safer streets, and less congestion."
- "Transit is freedom."
- "Transit connects us all"
- "Transit is invaluable. It defined the region. We need to invest in more transit, more accessible, more innovative transit. Transit is one of the most integral components to Chicagoland's economic engine."
- "It is absolutely essential to Chicago's past, present, and future. We will not thrive without continued investment in a stronger transit network."
- "It's essential to my mobility, I depend on it to get to work, see friends, visit family, and get around anywhere I need to go."
- "A reliable transit system is what makes a city like Chicago feel vibrant. It allows people of all social-economic backgrounds to have access to the same things."

Coalescing Phase Outcomes

During a public comment period in December 2022 and January 2023, the RTA received 36 comments from 42 individuals and organizations.

Common themes included:

- Support for Transit and the plan



- Funding, both voicing support of funding and also concerns or questions about what that could look like
- Safety, Security, Reliability
- Electrification, aiming for zero-emissions
- Fare Affordability, Integration
- Other topics include Adaptation, last-mile connections, governance reform

All comments can be found in a [Board memo](#) with responses from the RTA.

2023 Agenda for Advocacy & Action

The 2023 Agenda for Advocacy and Action that outlines key priorities for the future of transit in northeastern Illinois. Advocacy items include longer-term, substantive changes to how our regional transit system works, and largely include changes that the RTA and Service Boards need support from other organizations, communities, and political leaders to accomplish, such as seeking new sustainable funding for transit or working with roadway agencies to prioritize transit-friendly streets.

Action items have the potential to be more immediate. They may not be easy, but will help address changing and unmet needs of riders and the communities we serve. These are things the RTA and Service Boards can take the lead to implement with the support of our stakeholders such as improvements to safety, accessibility, and affordability of transit. Advocacy items and action items go hand in hand and are essential to accomplish together to both secure the transit system’s financial future and ensure the system works better for everyone.

The list has evolved some since it was first published in August 2022, but the final list and full details on each item can be found in *Transit is the Answer*.

Advocacy

To realize the plan’s vision, a shared advocacy effort will be required to...

- **Advocacy Area 1:** Secure increased funding for transit operations.
- **Advocacy Area 2:** Develop a funding structure that is less reliant on rider fares, but instead focused on expanding access to opportunity.
- **Advocacy Area 3:** Build a coalition around the value transit brings to the Chicago region.
- **Advocacy Area 4:** Support communities’ efforts to improve the area around their transit stations and stops and pursue equitable transit-oriented development.
- **Advocacy Area 5:** Engage with communities in an inclusive and transparent way about how transit dollars are spent in the Chicago region.
- **Advocacy Area 6:** Secure increased funding for transit infrastructure.
- **Advocacy Area 7:** Partner with roadway agencies to build more transit-friendly streets and advance bus rapid transit.

Action

The plan process has identified immediate actions for RTA and the Service Boards including:



- **Action 1:** Make the transit system safer and more secure for everyone.
- **Action 2:** Use new funding as a catalyst to create a fully accessible transit system.
- **Action 3:** Provide more accurate, real-time travel information for riders.
- **Action 4:** Make paying for transit more seamless and more affordable.
- **Action 5:** Accelerate the transition to a near-zero emission regional transit system and prioritize communities burdened by poor air quality.
- **Action 6:** Assess the regional capital program in a new way including considerations for racial equity and mobility justice.
- **Action 7:** Adapt bus and rail service to meet the changing needs of riders.

Coalescing Phase Highlights

Movers Workshop #2 (Aug 2022)

Audience(s) of Focus	Movers, Influencers, Decision Makers
Participants	15 in person, 75 virtually

On August 9, 2022, the RTA hosted its second Movers Workshop to provide a thorough update on the working group process and outcomes and present for feedback the 2023 Advocacy and Action Agenda. The workshop began with a panel of working group members who were invited to share their perspectives on what it will take to advocate for Chicago’s regional transit system, their experience participating in the working group process, and what they specifically hope to see from the final strategic plan.

The panel was moderated by Paula Worthington, Senior Lecturer and Academic Director, Harris Policy Labs, University of Chicago, and included panelists Andrea Reed, Executive Director, Greater Roseland Chamber of Commerce; Jesse Elam, Director of Strategic Planning and Policy, Cook County Department of Transportation and Highways; Scott Hennings, Assistant Director of Transportation, McHenry County DOT; and Rebeca Mendoza, President, Evanston Latinos.

“It seems RTA has really taken a step forward by developing and implementing a strategic planning process that is very intentional, really trying to include a lot of voices, and reflect the desires of many different stakeholder groups throughout our region.”

— Paula Worthington

“One of the reasons I got involved in this plan is simply because I think we are stronger as a region when we work together, instead of our own unique silos. It is important too that the outcomes of this plan are representative of all corners of the region. Not just the City of Chicago, not just Cook County, but including all the collar counties as well, which have very different transit needs than the [denser] parts of the region. We all learned from each other and we have a stronger product because of that.”

— Scott Hennings

The second half of the Movers Workshop offered simultaneous virtual and in-person discussions on the 14 goals outlined in the 2023 Advocacy and Action Agenda. The RTA presented this list of coalesced priorities for the first time and facilitated feedback discussions



to get a sense of what's missing, what is most urgent, and what goals were stakeholders most willing to support. Facilitators presented 4 questions for participants to consider as each goal was discussed:

1. *What's already happening to achieve this goal?*
2. *What might get in the way of this agenda? What barriers/challenges can we anticipate?*
3. *How can we collaborate to overcome these barriers? What is needed to overcome these barriers?*
4. *What strategies can we collaborate on to advance this goal?*

Below are some of the responses that participants in the workshop discussions provided on each goal:

Goal #1: Increase and diversify operating funding sources

What's already happening to achieve this goal?

- The RTA is supporting community and policy engagement that captures a diverse set of voices.
- Dial-A-Ride in places like McHenry County (DOT).
- Change to sales tax collection which added around \$100 million in tax base.
- TMA partnerships with Pace and Metra to operate shuttle service (majorly impacted by Pandemic and will need reevaluation).

What might get in the way of this agenda? What barriers/challenges can we anticipate?

- State legislature push-back to any tax changes.
- Residents and community members might react negatively to tax increases for which they don't see benefits from or take advantage of.
- Lengthy time to see projects to implementation, especially on the capital projects side.
- Existing short-term debt problems that Metra and the CTA face with their infrastructure upgrades.

How can we collaborate to overcome these barriers? What is needed to overcome these barriers?

- Municipalities could work on strengthening relationships with RTA and service boards, while the RTA can do more to work collaboratively.
- Work with Government Affairs team to improve public engagement.
- A clear sense of how we communicate the value of transit to the region.
- Focus on identifying the problems and collaborative solutions, with equity at the core.

What strategies can we collaborate on to advance this goal?

- Include congestion pricing, especially if we are thinking about transit as a means to prevent more roadway expansion.
- Permanent relaxation of farebox recovery ratio.



- Rather than fare hikes, explore tax increases like a cities builder's tax with dedicated funding to transit operating costs; or a VMT-based tax as a replacement for the gas tax.
- Provide fare-free routes, days, weeks, etc., for certain demographics or areas being served by transit.

Goal #2: Develop equity-based operating funding structure that lowers reliance on fares to balance the operating budget

What's already happening to achieve this goal?

- Pace is partnering with junior colleges to train students to fill operator and/or mechanic positions.
- Region is getting discretionary funds on the capital projects side.
- RTA is exploring creative funding structures and discussing options more seriously.

What might get in the way of this agenda? What barriers/challenges can we anticipate?

- Understanding exactly what the RTA and the region mean by an "equity-based funding structure" and identifying how the scales of equity are balanced.
- Employee wages and salaries are biggest expense for all 3 service boards.
- Finding and retaining operators is still a major issue.
- If free fares were to be implemented, recovery ratio needs to be reevaluated.

How can we collaborate to overcome these barriers? What is needed to overcome these barriers?

- Continue making the case for transit and have a unified voice.
- Reevaluate the level of service provided (i.e., examine capacity of service and not necessarily ridership to assess access to opportunity).
- Strategically consider the trade-offs of all alternative funding structures.
- Dissolve the current disconnection between service boards, fare structures, cards, schedules, stations etc. Collaboration starts with the RTA facilitated coordination.

What strategies can we collaborate on to advance this goal?

- Implement seamless transfers or free rides for residents, which we can explore with a more flexible structure.
- Better collaboration with corporations, municipalities and service boards, and getting corporations, businesses, events etc. involved with hopes that they can contribute.
- Explore how buses can get a credit on toll roads.

Goal #3: Communicate the value the transit system brings to the region

What's already happening to achieve this goal?

- Marketing and social media presence has increased, especially throughout the pandemic. Messaging and conversation around transit has improved as a result (that said, many announcements are centered on service disruptions).



- This Movers Workshop is a prime example of coalition-building, but we need much more of it.
- Requiring new developments to invest in transit amenities and access.

What might get in the way of this agenda? What barriers/challenges can we anticipate?

- Divergent goals from municipalities, service boards, legislature.
- Disability and safety concerns are still prevalent in the region.
- Tarnished image/perception of public transit.

How can we collaborate to overcome these barriers? What is needed to overcome these barriers?

- Create focus groups with teens, employers, employees, and other demographics, to find out what messages resonate with difference audiences to make an advocacy push.
- Work with media outlets to change the narrative around transit.
- Continue these conversations and include new members of the community.

What strategies can we collaborate on to advance this goal?

- Be honest and vocal about what transit *is* doing and what it *isn't* doing in our region.
- Show the region what is possible if certain levels of investment are made – or not made.
- Largescale grassroots campaign (i.e., group rides, outings, partnering with events).
- Increased social media attention dedicated to transit.

Lastly, participants were asked to share the three (3) key topics for advocacy and action that they think are most urgent and that they are most willing to support. Here are the responses:

Topic	Urgency	Support
Increase and diversify operating funding sources		
Simplify and integrate payment system across CTA, Metra, and Pace, offer new free/reduced fare program		
Communicate the value the transit system brings to the region		
Increase safety and security for everyone using the system		
Reduce first/last mile barriers to using transit and support communities pursuing equitable transit-oriented development (eTOD)		
Ensure full accessibility		
Advance efforts to improve the reliability and speed of transit trips, bus rapid transit (BRT)		



Topic	Urgency	Support
Plan to achieve near-zero emissions for the region's transit system and prioritize equity in the process	II	IIII
Invest in state of good repair and distribute capital funding in a manner that prioritizes communities with greatest need	II	IIII
Adapt transit service to meet riders' changing needs and increase access to opportunities via transit	IIII	
Develop equity-based operating funding structure that lowers reliance on fares to balance the operating budget	II	II
Increase and diversify capital funding sources, pursue more "roadway" funding for transit		II
Increase the quantity and accuracy of real-time travel information		II
Increase transparency and communications with communities regarding transit spending, funding		

Rider Engagement Pop-Ups

Audience(s) of Focus	Impacted Public
Interactions	205
In-Depth Conversations	82

During the summer and fall of 2022, the RTA staffed interactive engagement tables at community events in all six counties to hear from riders about why they value transit and what they hope to see in the future. Hearing from transit-dependent communities of color, essential workers, and others who have been most reliant on public transit over the past few years was critical to creating a strategic plan that represents the region.

The RTA held pop-up engagements across all six counties:

- August 17, 2022: Glow Walk, Waukegan, IL, Lake County. At this event, the RTA heard how Metra connects the Lake County suburb to opportunities around the region and in Chicago and about the relationships many riders have with their Pace Suburban Bus drivers who take their children to and from school.
- August 27, 2022: Shop Roseland, Chicago, IL, Cook County. At this event on the Far South Side, the RTA heard about how issues like safety, cleanliness, and reliability are impacting riders' perceptions of transit, but also how riding transit is a critical way residents get around.
- September 4, 2022: Bike the Drive Festival, Chicago, IL, Cook County. At Bike the Drive, recreational bike ride and fundraiser that allows cyclists on Lake Shore Drive, the RTA heard about the connections that are necessary to create a truly multimodal transit system and how to create a system that is affordable and accessible for all.
- September 17, 2022: Latino Music and Food Festival, Joliet, IL. At this event, the RTA heard that Metra creates a key connection to the city of Chicago for entertainment and employment opportunities, and to maintain relationships with friends and family.



- September 24, 2022: Johnny Appleseed Festival, Crystal Lake, IL, McHenry County. At this event, the RTA heard that more frequent service and more coverage throughout McHenry County was important to residents.
- October 1, 2022: Kane County Flea Market, St. Charles, IL, Kane County and October 5, 2022: Glendale Heights' Family Health & Safety Fair, Glendale Heights, IL, DuPage County. At these events, RTA staff spoke with residents about how they use their local paratransit services and their desire for expanded service areas for both paratransit and Pace bus services.



The RTA's pop-up engagement boards inviting riders and residents to learn more about the strategic plan and share why they value living in a region with transit.

Strategic Plan Public Survey #3 on priority actions

The RTA Priority Actions Survey was open from August 30, 2022, to October 23rd, 2022. The survey had 1,037 respondents and represented a variety of stakeholders. As was true for the first strategic plan survey, the most common organizational affiliation was transit rider/general public (54%). The survey showed clear urgency and support for the Action and Advocacy Agenda proposed within the plan. Full results of the survey are [available online](#).

Unlike previous surveys made during this planning process, the RTA Priority Actions Survey asked additional demographic questions and transit use questions. These questions were added due to feedback from stakeholders across the process. Previous surveys did not ask these questions to reduce the time it took respondents to answer questions. Demographic questions included race, zip code, age, gender, and ability status. Respondents to this survey were disproportionately identified as White/Caucasian (75%), Hispanic/Latino (8%), African America/Black (6%), and Asian/Pacific Islander (5%). Thirteen percent of respondents identified as having a disability.

The survey showed there is clear urgency and support for the Action and Advocacy Agenda. Respondent feedback about the RTA Action and Advocacy goals present clear priorities for plan implementation, with a majority of respondents indicating urgency and support for plan goals.

When asked to select three (3) actions that respondents think are most urgent, “make the transit system safer and more secure for everyone.” was the most common response. “Adapt bus and rail service to meet the changing needs of riders.” and “provide more accurate, real-time travel information for riders.” were the second and third most common response options.

Action Goals and Respondent Urgency for Each

Action Goal	# of votes	% of respondents that said that this Goal is one of 3 most urgent (n=818)
Make the transit system safer and more secure for everyone.	497	61%
Adapt bus and rail service to meet the changing needs of riders.	477	58%
Provide more accurate, real-time travel information for riders.	412	50%
Accelerate the transition to a near-zero emission regional transit system and prioritize communities burdened by poor air quality.	342	42%
Use new funding as a catalyst to create a fully accessible transit system.	300	37%
Make paying for transit more seamless and more affordable.	237	29%
Assess the regional capital program in a new way including considerations for racial equity and mobility justice.	189	23%

When asked to select the three (3) advocacy goals that respondents supported the most, the most common response was “partner with roadway agencies to build more transit-friendly streets and advance bus rapid transit.” In alignment with previous RTA strategic planning surveys, second and third most common responses were in support of securing increased funding for transit operations and infrastructure.

Advocacy Goals and Respondent Urgency for Each

Advocacy Goal	# of votes	% of respondents that said that this goal was among the 3 most supported (n=807)
Partner with roadway agencies to build more transit-friendly streets and advance bus rapid transit.	477	59%
Secure increased funding for transit operations.	465	58%
Secure increased funding for transit infrastructure.	458	57%



Advocacy Goal	# of votes	% of respondents that said that goal was among the 3 most supported (n=807)
Support communities' efforts to improve the area around their transit stations and stops and pursue equitable transit-oriented development.	389	48%
Develop a budget less reliant on rider fares, but instead focused on expanding access to opportunity.	333	41%
Build a coalition around the value transit brings to the Chicago region.	162	20%
Engage with communities in an inclusive and transparent way about how transit dollars are spent in the Chicago region.	137	17%

Respondents highly value transit's connectivity, low emissions, and freedom.

The survey results affirm that responders highly value transit, with focus' on:

- Connectivity
- Zero Emissions
- Freedom
- Access
- Vitality
- Equity
- Economy
- Convenience

A few quotes from respondents include:

- "The value is too high to quantify - we need transit to exist."
- "Without transit, there's no Chicago."
- "Transit is access, transit is freedom."



Lessons learned

Over the course of the past 16 months, RTA has heard from more people, and on a deeper scale than ever before. This work has put RTA's existing values of transparency and accountability into practice. All involved have overwhelmingly heard- across all audiences- how vital transit is to this region. This input has thoroughly shaped the vision, principles and outcomes of the plan as well as the Agenda for Advocacy and Action that RTA will work with the region to begin implementing in 2023. In the implementation of this plan, RTA will use the lessons learned from this process to continue to engage with the public and RTA stakeholders in better and new ways.

A few ways the RTA has learned to reduce barriers to engagement can be instructive for future efforts:

- Compensation — RTA offered compensation to all stakeholders that do not work for agencies and were invited to participate in several meetings and/or to travel to meetings. Stakeholders who indicated to us that they desired compensation were fairly compensated.
- Communication — Language and concepts used to explain transit funding and planning issues needs to be simplified and explained more thoroughly in order to be clear to more and broader audiences.
- Location — Meeting residents where they are is an effective way to hear more input from riders, whether through pop-up engagements, or sharing information about the planning process at already existing meetings across the region.

This process has led the RTA to commit to ongoing improvements to its engagement processes. It was a learning and capacity-building experience. As we look to implementation of the plan, continued engagement with stakeholders and the public will be an important way to incorporate the principles of the plan into our work

This plan is a result of and credit to those who have provided input, insights, and ideas through this process. and RTA looks forward to working together to save and improve the transit system.

