

Opinion: To push Chicago ahead, make it easier to get around



Jackie Grimshaw, Greg Hummel and Ed Zotti

Chicago today faces extraordinary challenges. But we've been here before.

The Chicago Central Area Committee has been an advocate of long-term strategic planning for more than 60 years. We sponsored the initiative that created Dearborn Park in the South Loop. We believe the time has come for equally bold action now.

The challenge today is to secure Chicago's future in an era of reduced public resources. We propose spurring private investment through what we would call the Chicago Transit Redevelopment Trust. Last month, we entered this proposal in the MacArthur Foundation's

"100&Change" competition, which will award \$100 million to one grantee to solve a significant problem.

OPINION

The Trust would provide an integrated approach to two quite different sets of problems. They arise from the fact that, as a recent headline in Crain's Chicago Business put it, "Chicago is flourishing and dying at the same time."



A proposed connector and expanded Metra Electric service would speed transit in Chicago.

The Trust would do two things. First, it would stimulate neighborhood investment through a coordinated program of upgraded rail service and transit-oriented development along the Metra Electric train corridor on the South Side.

Second, it would lay the groundwork for the Connector, a new public transit line in Chicago’s central area.

The need for putting more dollars into the South Side is obvious. What’s less obvious is that, from a return-on-investment standpoint, much of the area – in particular, the south lakefront – is an excellent bet.

CCAC’s analysis of census data found rising economic indicators – household income, home values, educational attainment, professional employment – throughout virtually the entire south lakefront, from downtown to the Obama Library site in Woodlawn and on into South Shore.

All of this area is served by the Metra Electric commuter line – an underutilized resource. Service is infrequent during much of the day. Stops north of Hyde Park are few. Fares aren’t integrated with CTA’s.

There’s sound reason to think better public transit would stimulate substantial private investment if the two were coordinated. Private investment is occurring already. Many blocks have been beautifully restored.

But revitalization remains tenuous. Vacant lots abound. Basic amenities such as grocery stores are sparse (although a new Mariano’s just opened in Bronzeville). Violent crime is more frequent than on the north side.

Therein lies the opportunity. The south lakefront is an upwardly mobile, mostly minority area still on the cusp. Better transit would help anchor it. Upgraded service would also benefit areas such as the Far South Side that are distant from the L.

Why is transit so transformative? Because it provides easy access to downtown – where, increasingly, the jobs are.

That brings us to the Trust’s other objective: preparing for new transit in Chicago’s central area.

Professional employment in central Chicago has been rising for more than 40 years and is now at a record high. CCAC estimates that, going forward, downtown will add 60,000 to 90,000 jobs per decade.

Our analysis further suggests that, since 1998, most new downtown professional workers have chosen to live in the city and take the L to work. As a result, L ridership is at the highest level since at least 1960 and growing.

In ten years, CCAC estimates, weekday CTA rail demand will rise by roughly 150,000 to more than 900,000 rides.

The L has carried 900,000-plus daily riders a few times, most recently in connection with the World Series and the Cubs parade. “Cattle car” sums up conditions on such occasions. Imagine that every day.

Recognizing the coming crunch on L lines, the CTA is preparing to build, among other things, the Red-Purple Bypass in Lake View. This critical improvement will allow more trains, buying the system perhaps 10 years.

After that, CCAC projects, all North and Northwest Side trains will be full. Subsequent capacity increases will require billions of dollars.

Lacking an alternative, most new workers will live downtown. The majority do so already. The central area is on track to gain 100,000 residents between 2000 and 2020.

The L with its hub-and-spoke design is ill suited to moving large numbers of people within the core. Buses rarely get above slow-jog speed at peak times now. Even if cars and taxis give way to ride shares, there’s only so much street surface. Gridlock looms.

Thus the need for new rail. Using old rail right-of-way where possible, the Connector would link the L and Metra to each other and to destinations inaccessible to one or both now, such as Michigan Avenue, Navy Pier and McCormick Place. It would also permit development of areas now vacant for lack of transit and double the size of the city’s core.

The two projects we propose are part of a single vision – an integrated rail system carrying increasing numbers of workers to good-paying jobs downtown from all parts of the city and region. An enhanced Metra Electric and other existing rail lines would get riders downtown; the Connector would distribute them within a much expanded central area.

Together the two projects would transform Chicago – and we believe they would do so faster and more cheaply than alternatives. We urge decision makers to embrace this vision and help make it a reality.

Jacky Grimshaw is vice president for policy with the Center for Neighborhood Technology. Greg Hummel, a partner with the international law firm Bryan Cave, is chair of the Chicago Central Area Committee. Ed Zotti is a transit consultant and editor of the Straight Dope syndicated column, which is published by Sun-Times Media.

Follow the Editorial Board on Twitter: [Follow @csteditorials](#)

Source:

Grimshaw, Jackie, Greg Hummel, and Ed Zotti. "Opinion: To Push Chicago Ahead, Make It Easier to Get around." *Chicago Sun-Times*. Sun-Times Editorial, 24 Nov. 2016. Web. 02 Dec. 2016.

<<http://chicago.suntimes.com/opinion/opinion-to-push-chicago-ahead-make-it-easier-to-get-around/>>.