

To: RTA Board of Directors

CC: Boards of Directors of CTA, Metra, and Pace

Date: April 15, 2020

Subject: Public and Stakeholder Engagement in Chicago Transit's COVID-19 Response

From: Active Transportation Alliance, Center for Neighborhood Technology, Elevated Chicago, Illinois Environmental Council, Metropolitan Planning Council, Respiratory Health Association, Shared-Use Mobility Center, Sierra Club Illinois

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Thank you for your hard work and service during these difficult times. The COVID-19 pandemic presents enormous challenges for RTA, CTA, Metra, and Pace. Agency staff is working tirelessly to overcome these challenges and keep our buses and trains moving safely for essential workers. In the present chaos and uncertainty, agencies are starting to plan for how our region's transit system will work in the post-Shelter-in-Place and COVID-19 world. But they can't do it alone.

As representatives of Chicagoland's business, civic, and academic communities, we are committed to advocating for public transit during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. This includes 1) advocating for emergency assistance funding and reform in Springfield and Washington; 2) addressing the needs of essential workers riding and operating public transit to sustain our regional economy under extraordinary circumstances; and 3) preparing our transit system to be a driver of health and economic resilience during our region's recovery from the pandemic and its fallout.

We recognize this is not a short-term crisis for Chicago transit that will go away when the stay-at-home order is lifted and social distancing guidelines ease. The financial impact will ripple for many months and years, as more Chicagoans continue to work from home and remain wary of buses and trains.

This crisis forces us to rethink how we view public transit and reevaluate our regional goals, with racial equity and public health outcomes at the center. Ridership cannot and should not be the primary metric for evaluation. **Transit is a public good that is essential to sustaining and reviving our regional economy – even if far fewer people are riding.** Low-income Chicagoans who rely on transit to get around during and after this crisis, many of whom are Black and Brown, are providing services that are critical to meeting basic needs.

We recognize many of the current funding sources and formulas for transit are linked to ridership and colorblind beyond federal civil rights obligations, but now is the time to begin to change that at the local, state, and federal level. Access to jobs and services, with a focus on people of color and low-income residents, is a better way to measure transit's effectiveness.

**We call on RTA, CTA, Metra, and Pace to establish an equitable, clear and transparent process to engage stakeholders and the public in the planning process for the regional transit system's response to COVID-19.** This includes spending decisions associated with the recent federal CARES Act and any future stimulus and transportation funding bills. It also involves developing a shared legislative agenda to advocate for Chicagoland public transit in Springfield and Washington.

Following is a list of some immediate, near-term, and mid-term strategies for discussion and cooperation. This is not intended to be an exhaustive list. We suggest setting up working groups with civic, academic, business, and community representation around these and other topics as soon as

possible. We appreciate consideration of these topics and look forward to working together to make transit strong for the entire Chicago region.

**Immediate:**

- *Maintain critical mass transit routes:* Service boards should work with public health officials to identify key routes to essential services (healthcare, grocery stores, etc.) and, if necessary, increase service to allow for social distancing on these routes. Service should immediately be increased on routes where crowding occurs consistently, and social distancing isn't possible.

Given the racial disparities in COVID-19 cases and deaths, racial equity must be prioritized in any service changes. Working with other agencies to address walkability and accessibility from/to transit stops, especially those nearby essential services like grocery stores, pharmacies, clinics, and hospitals, should also be an area of focus.

- *Protect frontline transit workers, many of whom are people of color and being hit hard by COVID-19:* In cooperation with transit operators, improve the safety of mass transit work force by providing masks and other necessary PPE, making tests available for workers who need them, identifying and addressing air quality issues related to filtration and ventilation, providing hazard pay to maintain workforce, etc.
- *Prioritize safety of riders:* Continue to identify and implement best practices nationally and globally for regular cleanings, boarding processes, distancing on vehicles, rear-boarding, etc., and position transit assets as hubs for health, by using stops, vehicles and facilities as places for the dissemination of information and public health resources
- *Evaluate and enhance accessibility for riders with disabilities:* Work with the disability rights community to identify needs and implement improvements. Ensure that new transportation policies, even temporary ones, do not discriminate against people with disabilities, that service changes are communicated clearly, and that paratransit access is maintained even if fixed routes are changed.
- *Develop unified fare policy:* Define and communicate consistent fare policies among all transit providers, including enforcement policies. Consider free CTA and Pace bus fares for the duration of the stay-at-home order and subsidized reduced fare programs for low-income riders for the long-term.
- *Share relevant data publicly:* Service boards should make real-time data feeds and timely ridership reports available to the public for possible analyses of racial equity, geographic distribution, etc. Establish a data working group to identify specific needs and projects.
- *Improve rider communications:* Service boards should provide real-time updates to riders and the public about service adjustments due to crowding and other safety concerns using a variety of communication platforms. Information should be available to the public in accessible ways and in multiple languages, including signs, social media feeds, and the news media. Phone and text updates should be explored for riders without smartphone access.

- *Apply a racial equity lens and provide transparency on stimulus spending:* Make plans and criteria for spending federal stimulus dollars publicly available and open for public comment.
- *Optimize debt policies across agencies:* Address questions about whether RTA should borrow to maintain service/capital program, whether it's preferable to flood the market with debt from more than one agency, etc.

**Near-Term (next few months):**

- *Pursue state legislative changes:* Make changes to state law and RTA regulations that would help service boards maintain service, including operating revenue flow changes, perhaps via Illinois General Assembly; temporary suspension or lasting changes to the farebox recovery ratio, etc.
- *Consistently evaluate service:* Rebalance service schedules and routes among all three agencies to maintain geographic and temporal service coverage with an equity lens, given the racial disparities in COVID-19 cases and deaths.
- *Promote cross-agency coordination:* RTA and service boards should consider ideas like sharing vehicles (Pace/Metra) and workforce if we face a shortage; maintenance prioritization (if one agency has more resources to clean/maintain an asset, then allow them to do it for the other agency); consider service coordination across agencies, such as identifying routes where a Metra train could replace or supplement bus service or vice versa, etc.
- *Strengthen collaboration with local government agencies (especially those involved in planning and public health), developers, and community-based groups to reinforce current transit-oriented development efforts:* Stimulus dollars and other sources of funding for infrastructure should contribute to the growth of equitable TOD across our region.
- *Transparently identify needs:* Provide relevant information and updates on agency needs, including sharing the additional cost to each service board due to crisis.
- *Establish robust community engagement principles and processes:* In order to recover from this crisis and generate community support for transit, we need to go beyond providing information and soliciting public comment, and fully and meaningfully engage riders and the community at large in public transportation decision-making
- *Formulate policies/response to likely contact tracing protocols put in place to limit spread of COVID-19:* Begin planning to determine role transit will play, if any, in a region-wide test or tracing system.
- *Formulate federal transportation policy:* Develop shared regional agenda for federal stimulus and infrastructure bills, and a possible reauthorization of the federal transportation program. Identify funding needs for operations in key areas, areas for regulatory relief, etc.
- *Communicate clearly and accurately in a timely manner:* At the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis, the Metropolitan Transit Authority in New York publicly explained their efforts to increase bus

and subway cleaning, but CTA said no increased cleaning was required<sup>1</sup>. Our transit agencies will need to do better if they are going to persuade passengers to return.

- *Review capital project plans:* Identify critical capital projects that can be expedited while ridership/traffic is light; consider elevating projects in areas of the region with larger numbers of essential workers and lower income riders; prioritize equity-focused investments in areas with significant Black/Brown populations.

#### **Mid-Term (within one year):**

- *Conduct public awareness campaigns with a focus on communities of color:* Develop culturally competent marketing and education campaigns on taking transit.
- *Research transit's impact on COVID-19 spread and its role in promoting public health recovery:* Conduct research on whether mass transit has contributed to transmission in any meaningful way, and learn from other regions, nationally and globally, how their transit agencies collaborate with public health partners to control and end pandemics.
- *Pursue coordinated pilot programs:* Implement pilots/demonstration projects that foster and showcase nimble operations and coordination, including a demonstration program involving the Metra Electric and Rock Island corridors with lower fares, and easier transfers to other transit and mobility options, and enhanced service on Chicago's South Side and South Suburbs.
- *Update long-term capital program:* Complete development of new performance-based planning process for transit capital investments. Reprioritize capital program in light of reduced revenues in a way that is transparent and data-driven (avoid political decisions on capital projects in a constrained fiscal environment).
- *Strengthen emissions reductions efforts:* As COVID 19 deaths are exacerbated by air pollution exposure and climate change remains a long-term threat to the region, future planning and procurement decisions should prioritize moving away from fossil fuel dependency and towards zero-emission technologies. Agencies should continue to work to obtain additional zero emission vehicle funding from federal and state sources, including but not limited to the VW settlement and state capital funds for electric vehicle charging infrastructure.
- *Review and enhance plans for transit-oriented development with a focus on racial equity and public health:* Work with residents and equitable TOD stakeholders like Elevated Chicago to prioritize development in the areas hardest hit by COVID-19 and low-income communities of color across the region, ensuring that new development does not contribute to community displacement.
- *Revise regional transit goals:* Review and update goals and metrics in RTA, CTA, Metra, and Pace strategic plans and CMAP's On To 2050 regional plan – including our current regional goal to double public transit ridership.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://wbbm780.radio.com/articles/cta-were-pretty-clean-already>