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To:
Chicago Mayor Lori E. Lightfoot
Chicago Department of Transportation Commissioner Gia Biagi
Chicago City Council

The [just announced Chicago Works Five Year Capital Plan](#) offers Chicago an extraordinary opportunity to show how investing in smart infrastructure can help spark and sustain an equitable recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

In particular, the **\$159.2 million dedicated to the Chicago Department of Transportation (CDOT) in 2021 and 2022 for Complete Streets improvements – like protected bike lanes and dedicated bus lanes** – can transform Chicago’s streets while helping meet its most pressing challenges.

While some progress has been made to improve walking, biking, and transit on our streets, particularly downtown, we must be frank: we are failing to build a truly connected network that will make clean transportation a better option for more Chicagoans.

This failure has potentially devastating consequences for our communities and our economy while making our goals related to equity, health, and climate so much further from our reach.

For years, lack of local funding has been one of the key barriers to implementing complete streets plans and meeting the city’s safety and mobility goals. **With local funding now secured, Chicago must take advantage of this moment to work with communities for transformational change.**

It's looking increasingly likely this infusion of local funds will soon be supplemented by additional federal support. President Biden’s American Jobs Plan proposes to dramatically rethink the nation’s transportation priorities and focus investment on projects that positively impact the climate and racial equity. Nearly every day, U.S. Department of Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg comments on the eagerness of the Biden administration to invest in transit, walking, and biking in America’s cities.



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By seizing the opportunities presented by this new local and federal funding, we can build a safer, more integrated walking, biking, and transit network. Traffic safety is truly in crisis, with Chicago experiencing a [45% increase](#) in fatalities in 2020 compared to the previous year. In 2016 Chicago re-affirmed its Vision Zero commitment to eliminate traffic fatalities and serious injuries within 10 years, but since then we've continued to average more than 110 deaths per year with no signs of a downward trend.

A better network would save lives by reducing traffic crashes and air pollution – both of which disproportionately harm Black and Brown Chicagoans. It would also save money for working families who do not own a car or struggle to afford one and it would make life easier for thousands of residents who are not physically able to drive.

We urge Mayor Lightfoot, City Council, transportation and transit agency leaders to take the following steps to ensure the capital plan achieves its goal to encourage clean, healthy, and affordable transportation.

CREATE TRANSPARENCY & COMMUNITY ACCOUNTABILITY

Transformational change is only possible if communities are a part of the decision-making process about how and where funds will be spent. The first pillar of the capital plan is an “equitable and transparent process that has been informed by stakeholder input.”

To date this has not been the case. Monday's [press release kicking off the plan](#) includes basic breakdowns of spending categories and general criteria for project selection, but this information was [largely available when the plan passed in November](#). We are concerned about the lack of transparency around project selection and implementation. It's unclear if the city has gathered any community input in the process.

This is particularly concerning given the fact that CDOT has not convened the Mayor's Pedestrian Advisory Council or the Mayor's Bicycle Advisory Council since the start of the pandemic, eliminating the only public forums for discussing citywide Complete Streets spending and project development.

These new dollars present not only a great opportunity to bring much needed infrastructure improvements to neighborhoods hit hard by the pandemic and the accompanying economic crisis, but also an opportunity for the city government to restore trust and create new models of public participation. Community-based organizations and stakeholders must be at the table with city officials identifying key projects and priorities that will improve mobility and access to jobs in the recovery.



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ACTIONS

- Develop and implement a public engagement strategy around capital spending to ensure residents can proactively shape project plans.
- Release additional information on the project development process, including details on how project selection criteria are being measured and weighted.
- Re-establish MBAC and MPAC or create a new public forum for citywide transportation decision-making.

IMPLEMENT VISION ZERO IMPROVEMENTS

In 2016 Chicago [re-affirmed its commitment to eliminate traffic fatalities and serious injuries by 2026](#). Unfortunately, the numbers are trending in the wrong direction. The plan used crash data to identify eight high-crash areas and 43 high-crash corridors where a disproportionate number of crashes are happening. Black Chicagoans are more than twice as likely to be killed in a traffic crash than White Chicagoans, and almost half of all fatal crash victims are Black.

The capital plan provides an opportunity to address this inequity at scale and build safer streets for all. Now more than ever, it's clear the path to safer streets for all requires design changes – not additional enforcement.

The city's [2018 High Crash Corridors Framework plan](#) charted a path for design improvements on all of the 43 high-crash corridors, but three years later only a handful of streets have been changed. The [2019 Vision Zero Chicago West Side plan](#) features community-informed recommendations for Austin, Garfield Park, and North Lawndale. Unfortunately, both plans lacked dedicated funding and pointed to an unreliable mix of local, state, and federal funding options. The \$10 million for Vision Zero over the first two years of the capital plan finally fills this gap.

- Develop a timeline and project schedule for traffic safety improvements on Vision Zero High Crash Corridors within the scope of the city's 5-year capital plan, starting with high-crash areas on the West and South Sides.

JUMP START STALLED PROGRESS ON PROTECTED BIKE LANES

Protected bike lanes (PBL) have been proven again and again as the best approach for making streets safe and comfortable for biking. People of all ages and abilities get excited about biking when they're physically protected from car traffic. The bike boom during the



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pandemic has further increased public and political support for bike lanes that was already on the rise.

After years of falling behind on installing new PBLs, the capital plan presents an opportunity to reverse course. Chicago installed 25 miles of PBLs from 2011 through 2016 [but just three miles in the last four years](#). Mayor Lightfoot vowed to change that when she [committed to building at least 50 miles in her first term](#), but so far there are no signs of an uptick.

It's critical that investments contribute to a bicycle network across the city. Focusing on the most important routes that connect neighborhoods is a good place to start. The city's [Streets for Cycling plan](#) identifies seven spoke routes (Clark, Milwaukee, Lake/Randolph, Archer, Vincennes, South Chicago, State Street/Wabash) intended to create the backbone of a safe and comfortable citywide cycling network.

Only 10 of the 65 miles on these routes have had protected bike lanes installed since the plan was released in 2012. Most of those miles are on the North Side and downtown. The capital plan provides an opportunity to address these deficits.

ACTIONS

- Install at least 10 miles of protected bike lanes on spoke routes by 2023, prioritizing the South and West Side routes that lack quality infrastructure
- Develop a timeline and project schedule to install 30 additional miles by 2026, the end of the city's 5-year capital plan.

DELIVER A NETWORK OF DEDICATED BUS LANES

Dedicated bus lanes are the most cost-effective and easiest way to deliver fast and reliable transit service to the Chicagoans who need it the most. The pandemic has further highlighted the vital role buses play in connecting people to jobs, healthcare, food, and family. We can strengthen these connections by using capital plan funds to give buses the priority they deserve on our streets.

We have commended the city's efforts to install 7.6 miles of temporary bus lanes on Chicago Avenue and 79th Street in late 2020, but this only scratches the surface of what is needed. Even including these temporary lanes, Chicago still has fewer than 15 total miles. New York City has more than 80 miles and even Los Angeles has more than 40 miles. The lanes we do have are often blocked, and there's been no discussion of a fair enforcement approach that would keep buses moving freely.



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Like bike lanes, bus lanes are another area where city leaders are not following through on their commitments. After [pledging as a candidate to install 50 miles of bus lanes in her first term](#), Mayor Lightfoot [said she would create a bus prioritization network plan in her first 100 days](#) that “identifies where and when bus lanes would be added.”

More than two years in, Chicago still lacks such a plan. CDOT and CTA were [awarded federal funds in 2019 to create a bus priority network plan](#) but public and stakeholder outreach still has not started. Mayor Lightfoot, CTA, and CDOT must make finishing this plan a priority to inform capital plan spending.

ACTIONS

- Complete the bus priority network plan in 2021.
- Install at least 20 miles of bus lanes on high-ridership routes by 2023, focusing on South and West Side routes that maintained ridership during the pandemic due to the high percentage of Black and Brown essential workers. Upgrades should include transit signal priority and all door boarding where possible.
- Develop a project schedule to install 30 additional miles by 2026, the end of the city’s 5-year capital plan.

MAKE STREETSCAPES WORK FOR MOBILITY

The largest portion of the Complete Streets set-aside in the capital plan, \$104M of \$165M total over the first two years (63%), goes to the streetscape program. These projects aim to “rehabilitate Chicago’s neighborhood commercial areas into active, attractive places for Chicagoans to live, work, and play.” This must include making these streets more walkable and easier to access by walking, biking, and public transit.

Streetscape project designs vary greatly. Most make upgrades to public spaces through sidewalk reconstruction, landscaping, lighting, signage, and public art; only some installations include major mobility components. For example, the [2014 Broadway/Lawrence streetscape](#) involved removing a travel lane in each direction to make room for new, wider sidewalks and marked bike lanes. The [2015 Argyle streetscape](#) created Chicago’s first shared street with limited vehicle access and free flowing walking and biking traffic. Transformational projects such as these should be the standard for all streetscape designs.

Streetscapes could also include upgrading bus stops with new shelters and extending the curb into the parking lane to ease boarding. We must ensure the streetscapes funded by the capital plan include these types of high-impact transportation components where they are needed.



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Finally, streetscape projects should have a robust community engagement process to create design concepts that reflect the neighborhood and people who live there. Recent crosswalk installations on Halsted in Lakeview East and 79th Street in the South Shore community are good examples.

ACTIONS

- Set baseline design goals for all streetscape projects that emphasize and positively impact Chicago's modal hierarchy and crash reduction goals and improve transit riders' experiences.
- Review streetscape plans and identify opportunities to repurpose street space for people walking, biking, and riding transit, and people with disabilities; prioritize South and West Side investments where safety, accessibility, and mobility needs are greatest.
- Revise and strengthen the public engagement process for streetscape projects to focus on cultural context and neighborhood character.

NEXT STEPS

On behalf of our members and supporters, we appreciate your attention to these issues and would look forward to any opportunity to discuss them in the near future. We are eager to work with you and advocates across the city to take advantage of the unique opportunity the capital plan presents to transform our transportation network.