

February 14, 2022

RTA Administrative Offices
175 W. Jackson Blvd, Suite 1550
Chicago, IL 60604

RTA Board of Directors:

We are writing to express our strong concern with the Regional Transportation Authority's (RTA) strategic planning process. Our organizations have been invited to participate in the development of this plan, but over the past year we still have not seen any serious effort to address the existing and imminent challenges facing our transit system. This plan, and the process to develop it, needs to meet the needs of this historic moment and, to date, it has not.

On January 26, RTA convened over a hundred stakeholders for a "Strategic Plan Workshop." Many of those present have vast expertise, experience, and history dealing with serious financial and public policy issues surrounding public transit. Instead of using their valuable time to elicit meaningful reaction to serious policy choices, participants were treated as little more than a focus group to test marketing messages around transit. Indeed, asking participants (or, previously, the public via survey) to choose between a transit system that is fiscally stable and one that addresses climate change, for example, is a false choice and a wasted opportunity.

There was also a clear lack racial diversity in the group and among staff and facilitators. There were no ground rules for the meeting and most slides were difficult to understand and not helpful. When the agency's recent survey came up, there was no discussion of the methodology and whose views the responses represent - and those who are not represented. The proposed vision statement lacks an equity lens and the language is so broad, nondescript, and void of local context that it lacks meaning. The same applies to the proposed principles, which are now being used to form subgroups. The phrase "open to change" was used repeatedly, which is incredibly troubling considering the major crisis Chicago area transit is facing and the urgent need to change in order for transit to survive.

The pandemic has hit mass transit hard. Systemwide ridership is just 60 percent of pre-pandemic levels on a good day. Yet transit is more necessary than it ever has been, especially for communities of color and those who rely on transit as their primary mode of transportation. CTA, Metra, and Pace have largely been able to meet transit riders' needs during the pandemic, but this was only possible because of federal emergency funding. This emergency funding will expire and we need a plan to address that uncertain and serious future.

Nine months into the planning process, stakeholders should be discussing real and difficult decisions, including how to plan transit services given long term ridership uncertainty; choices over farebox and tax revenues to support transit; what equity measures should guide our regional investments; and governance of our disparate

transit services. RTA's incremental, status quo planning process lacks the awareness of the unprecedented, compounding crises communities have faced over the last two years. And it will leave the transit system more vulnerable given looming threats. After more than a year hearing from elected officials, groups like ours, RTA board members, and the public, the RTA has not yet developed any proposals that address this obvious and predictable crisis. Transformational ideas may be controversial, but that is not an excuse to avoid them. We cannot allow bureaucratic anxiety to lock the region's transit system into doomsday scenarios of emergency service shutdowns, financial fights between the service boards, and uncertainty for millions of people and businesses.

RTA's plan must be radically different. **A stronger plan starts with serious engagement from RTA with the public and the communities that depend on transit the most.** We urge RTA to review recent policy planning models like those used by the City of Chicago's Equitable Transit Oriented Development (ETOD) Working Group and by CMAP's ongoing COVID Mobility Recovery Steering Committee. To date, the engagement around your plan has been lacking and when it has happened, it has concentrated only on high-level platitudes regarding transit. The public already agrees transit is essential to the City's well-being, is an important part of our fight against climate change, and necessary for businesses and economic growth. What we need now are serious and specific proposals to maintain those foundational roles transit plays.

Signed,

Active Transportation Alliance

Center for Neighborhood Technology

Elevated Chicago

Environmental Law & Policy Center

High Speed Rail Alliance

Metropolitan Planning Council

Shared-Use Mobility Center