

Board of the Regional Transportation Authority

January 9, 2023

Re: RTA's Draft Strategic Plan

Members of the Board,

As organizations vested in our area's transit system, we support the principles of equity, change, and service improvements outlined in RTA's draft strategic plan, *Transit is the Answer*. Each of our organizations was involved in the process leading to the publication of this draft plan. We sincerely appreciate the opportunity to partner and engage deeply in the process to define the challenges facing our transit system and identify strategies to address them.

But while we support the plan's goals, we are disappointed that the plan lacks necessary specificity on how those goals will be achieved. It leaves both the agencies without a roadmap and the public without a mechanism to hold them accountable. Best practices indicate that successful planning involves plans that are Specific, Measurable, Assignable, Realistic, Time-Related, Inclusive, and Equitable.

The RTA could be much more prescriptive on the steps participating agencies, departments, and governing bodies need to take in order to achieve a better connected, thriving region that is winning the fight against climate change. The RTA should be setting ambitious and realistic time-related targets for realizing the admirable goals outlined throughout the plan. Instead, this plan lists only 2023 activities and vague longer-term goals.

Specifically, our organizations believe that the RTA should further outline the following in its strategic plan:

- Hurdles and actions that the RTA sees as crucial to achieving better regional coordination between all its service boards as well as participating government agencies and departments. (We are disappointed that the RTA is silent on CTA's non-participation in the Fair Transit South Cook fare pilot – the most promising effort at regional coordination we've seen.) The RTA should also outline how it plans to communicate its findings to the public.
- Steps that need to be taken at each level of government to ensure that the RTA and its service boards can close their financial gaps and support future improvements to our regional transit system. The RTA understands that cutting service is not a tenable solution to fill any funding gaps, and we are pleased that the RTA identifies "pursuing additional funding to maintain our robust transit system" as the right path forward. However, there should be more specifics on the role the RTA will play and steps the agency will take to establish those new funding sources.
- The timeline and actions necessary for our region's transit agencies to achieve full fare integration. Define what upgrades will be pursued in the Ventra 2.0 rollout planned for 2024/2025. The current language that Metra will "begin installation of ticket vending machines, which could eventually accept Ventra payments" (p.60) is grossly inadequate.

- Specific steps Metra, the RTA, and each participating agency or company would need to take in order to successfully implement a regional rail system throughout our region.
- Steps that the RTA, the CTA, and Pace should take in order to take advantage of the unprecedented amount of federal funding available for Bus Rapid Transit projects to facilitate significant bus corridor upgrades.
- Clear steps that the RTA, CTA, and Pace must take to build the infrastructure needed to operate a regional network of electric buses.
- How current transit resources can be used more effectively to compassionately de-escalate safety situations before they become harmful, specifically the security guards added in 2022 with a 3-year contract. We are skeptical of CTA's initiative to "develop new ways to deter fare theft and prevent fare evasion before it leads to other illicit activity" as we have seen no evidence from the City of Chicago that fare evasion does, in fact, lead to other illicit activity.
- How the RTA plans to hold communities accountable for implementing land use changes that support transit, equity, and climate goals.
- Outline steps each agency must take to train all staff in core competencies in supporting people with disabilities, to make every transit facility compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act, and to implement data collection processes that assess accessibility access across the regional transit system.

On the positive side, we are pleased that the draft plan suggests thoughtful performance measures. We ask that RTA publish these metrics regularly in an open data format so that others can evaluate progress. One specific change to the metrics, though, is to shift the emphasis from "greenhouse gas emissions from **transit**" to "greenhouse gas emissions from **transportation**." This distinction is important, as shifting people from cars to transit generally brings substantially more environmental benefit than reducing emissions from public transit vehicles. We fully support cleaning up transit ("Action 5") but increasing transit ridership is even more important.

In addition, our organizations were pleased to see several Shared Activities defined that RTA would lead, such as a regional climate action plan, piloting a regional reduced fare program, regional accessibility improvement program, and cross-sector regional safety and security summit. We look forward to supporting the RTA in its leadership role on each of these activities.

Representatives of our organizations would like to meet with the RTA to discuss the suggestions outlined in this letter, and we welcome opportunities to support the agency as it develops potential next steps. We hope that our feedback can contribute to an even stronger regional plan that is promptly updated, approved, and executed. We appreciate the opportunity to provide comments on the plan, and applaud the RTA for their continuous vision, leadership, and community engagement efforts.

Sincerely,

Access Living

Active Transportation Alliance

Elevated Chicago

Environmental Law and Policy Center

Equiticity

High Speed Rail Alliance

Illinois Environmental Council

Metropolitan Planning Council

