



Memorandum

To: Erin Aleman
From: CMAP staff
Date: September 12, 2023
Subject: Summary of public engagement conducted for PART

Summary

At the direction of the Illinois General Assembly to include meaningful public engagement in development of the PART report, CMAP implemented a communications and engagement plan to complement the Regional Transportation Authority's public engagement for its Transit is the Answer strategic plan. In addition to a public steering committee, CMAP's public engagement included eight focus groups with targeted audiences, discussions with the region's councils of governments and mayors, consultation with county elected and administrative leadership, engagement of transit service boards and staff, and in-depth discussion with CMAP's Community Alliance for Regional Equity. CMAP also shared updates about the report on the agency's [website](#)¹ and through its regular public and social media.

CMAP used the RTA's public engagement for Transit is the Answer as a starting point

The Regional Transportation Authority's (RTA) public engagement process for its [Transit is the Answer](#)² strategic plan provided the baseline for CMAP's meaningful public engagement efforts for the PART report, in line with the Illinois General Assembly's direction to also consider the

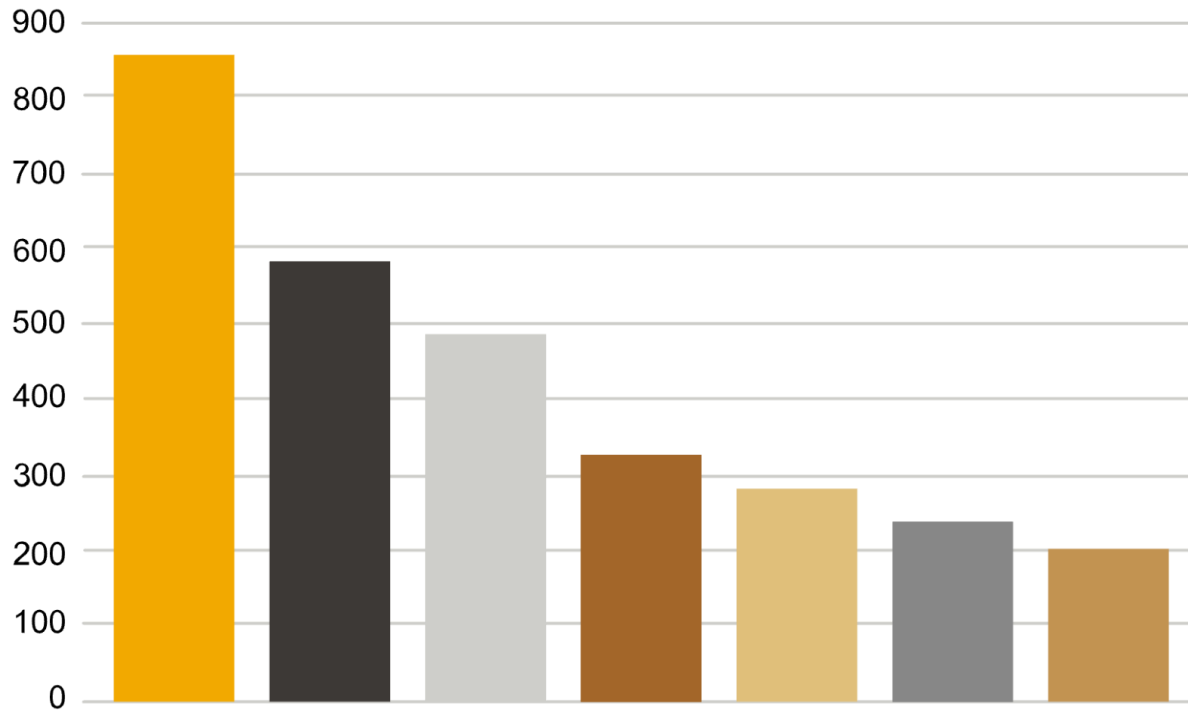
vision, principles, and recommendations of the RTA's strategic plan.³ CMAP reviewed the RTA's [report](#)⁴ of its engagement initiatives to develop a strategy for additional public engagement activities within the compressed timeframe for PART.

For Transit is the Answer, the RTA implemented a 16-month, regional public engagement initiative and heard from thousands of people. The RTA conducted surveys, held stakeholder meetings, convened working groups, offered public workshops, and engaged residents on social media. The Transit is the Answer strategic plan and its public engagement summary helped guide development of the PART report.








An RTA survey conducted in late 2021 asked respondents to prioritize changes to the transit system (see **Figure 1**). The survey responses are echoed in the themes from CMAP's public engagement.

Figure 1. Survey responses highlighted the importance of improving transit frequency and coverage

Question: Of possible changes to the transit system, which of these options should the RTA prioritize?



Responses

-  Creating a more flexible transit system that better serves destinations outside of downtown Chicago and hours outside of the traditional AM/PM commutes.
-  Taking a regional approach to investing in transit infrastructure in order to adapt to changing needs for how people want to get around the region.
-  Improving fare integration – e.g., Improved transfers, one fare card for all transit systems (Metra, CTA, and Pace)
-  Investing in sidewalks and other strategies to make accessing transit stations and stops safer and easier.
-  Strengthening regional policies to locate job opportunities in places that can more easily be served by transit.
-  Piloting reduced or free fares for certain populations of riders.
-  Returning to pre-COVID service levels.

Eight focus groups provided regional input and insights

To build on RTA’s public engagement, CMAP offered several different opportunities to share information and gather feedback from specific constituencies with interest in the region’s public transit system. To hear from these targeted audiences, CMAP facilitated eight focus groups, both in person and on Zoom (see **Figure 2**).

Figure 2. Focus groups included diverse regional perspectives.

Host	Geographic representation	Participants
Chicago Federation of Labor	Regional	Representatives of regional labor organizations
Chicago Plus	Regional	Representatives of regional convention and visitors’ bureaus
Chicagoland Chamber of Commerce	Regional	Representatives of regional corporations
CMAP Citizens Advisory Committee	Regional	Members of the agency’s public committee
Gail Borden Public Library	Elgin, Cook and Kane counties	Families with children
Northwest Center	Belmont Cragin community, Chicago	Students in the Northwest Center’s after-school programs
Salvation Army	Will County	Social service agency staff and volunteers serving low-income residents, immigrants, youth
Will County Center for Community Concern	Will County	Social service agency staff serving low- and moderate-income residents

The focus group discussions included background with regional context about the public transit system and infrastructure, how public transit operations are funded, and the impending gap between operational revenue and expenses. CMAP engaged focus group participants using anonymous, live polling questions to solicit information from participants about how they use public transit, its importance to them, and their responses to some of the proposed recommendations for public transit. The polling questions also provided a launch point for deeper discussion with participants.

Summary of focus group polling

CMAP used the Mentimeter live polling platform to solicit responses to specific questions across the eight focus groups. The polling was anonymous, with the results immediately shared with participants. The polling results do not purport to be representational sampling of northeastern Illinois residents or statistically significant but are shared here as they describe the participants and were relevant to the focus group discussions.

Most participants had a car available to them as their primary mode of transportation, and most participants also used public transportation for their travels, although with varied frequency and purposes. They agreed that the regional transit system is very important for reducing road congestion and improving the region's air quality. They also overwhelmingly agreed that public transit is very important for supporting regional economic growth and jobs and, more specifically, for providing people access to economic opportunities, given that the majority of jobs in northeastern Illinois cannot be done remotely.

As for focus group participants' access to public transit and the level of public transit services available to them, most participants expressed that they welcomed improvements to both access and service level. The focus group polling showed that participants felt the most valuable improvements to Chicago Transit Authority (CTA), Metra, and Pace Bus services would be:

- Faster and more reliable trains and buses
- More frequent service throughout the day
- More transit options closer to home

Finally, although participants agreed that is no one solution to ensuring the financial viability of a regional public transportation system, no two focus groups reached the same conclusion about preferred sources of new funding for public transit operations. Across the groups, participants ranked the options presented as follows:

1. Higher tolls on expressways
2. None of the options
3. New tax on currently untaxed services
4. Higher fares for public transit
5. Higher state vehicle registration fees
6. Higher gas tax
7. Higher sales tax rate

CMAP is grateful to each of the eight focus group host organizations for convening their constituents and, in some cases, providing a venue for the focus group. CMAP will share the PART report with the host organizations so that they can see how their input was incorporated.

Counties, regional of councils of government, service boards, and other stakeholders joined the conversation about PART

Between May and September 2023, CMAP executive director Erin Aleman and PART project leadership engaged the region's county boards and councils of government in a discussion of the future of public transit. CMAP briefed committees or boards for the region's councils of government and councils of mayors in thirteen meetings about the PART project, soliciting input and answering questions. For the region's seven counties, CMAP executive director Erin Aleman and PART project leadership made formal presentations to several county boards and provided briefings to county administrator and engineer groups.

CMAP staff also provided briefings about the Plan of Action for Regional Transit to state legislators, including leadership. Executive Director Erin Aleman also provided testimony related to the transit fiscal cliff and the role of PART at a joint hearing of the Illinois Senate Transportation Committee and Senate Appropriations-Public Safety and Infrastructure Committee hearing. CMAP staff also provided briefings to the Chicago Mayor's Office new municipal leadership. Other stakeholder briefings and presentations included the Illinois Road and Transportation Builders Association, American Council of Engineering Companies of Illinois (Public Transportation Committee), the Illinois Environmental Council, CMAP's Community Alliance for Regional Equity, and the Metropolitan Mayors Caucus. CMAP staff also provided regular updates at the agency's committee meetings, including the CMAP Transportation Committee, Climate Committee, Regional Economy Committee, the Citizens' Advisory Committee, and the Council of Mayors Executive Committee.

CMAP staff also presented updates to the Boards of CTA, Metra, Pace, and RTA, with a total of seven presentations. CMAP staff also engaged with transit service board leadership and staff with regular briefings and discussions throughout the PART process.

CMAP's Community Alliance for Regional Equity provided insights for the PART report

The PART team met with CMAP's Community Alliance for Regional Equity (CARE) cohort. The cohort consists of representatives from twelve community-based organizations across the region that have historically been excluded from the planning process. CARE members meet monthly to discuss transportation issues, troubleshoot common challenges, and provide feedback to CMAP on how to implement equity.

In May 2023, the PART team collaborated with CARE members for an in-depth discussion about PART project and collected feedback in small group discussions. The PART team focused the conversation on the issue of affordable fares, and the CARE members expanded the

conversation to consider the regional public transit system more broadly and expressed their priorities for transit system improvements.

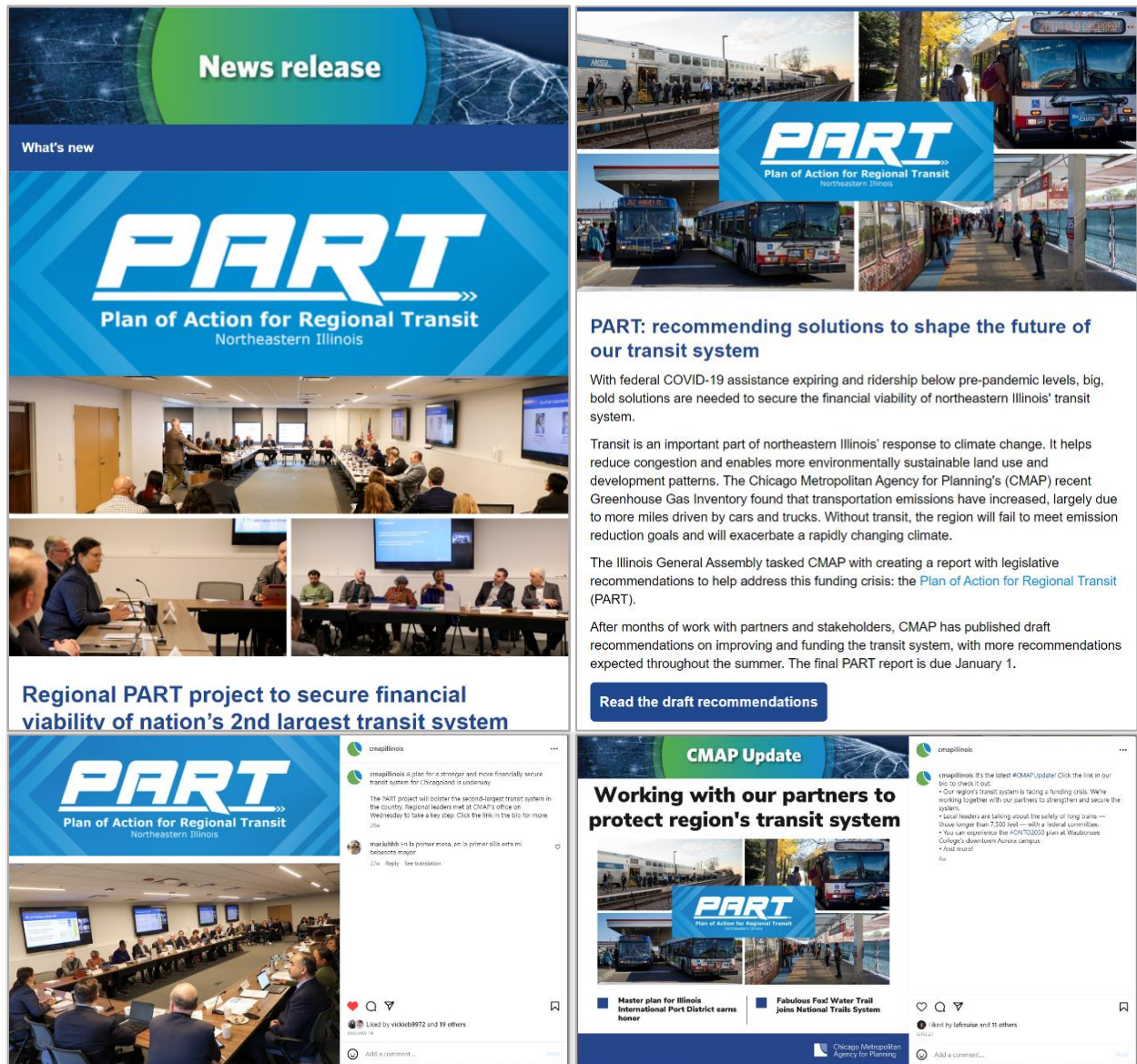
The CARE team discussed the following:

- Public transit affordability is important, as well as the quality and reliability of service
- Affordability affects ridership and the fare revenue to fund system improvements
- Fare affordability and subsidy programs burden potential users with administrative barriers to access
- Potential riders must perceive transit as a viable, reliable, and safe option, otherwise they will choose other modes of transportation, and
- Equity considerations must be at the center of decisions about fare pricing.

CMAP engaged the public through regular newsletters, social media, and its website

Beginning in January 2023, CMAP provided the public with regular updates about the PART report in its newsletters and on its website and engaged the agency's followers on social media. The newsletters informed stakeholders about the project, invited their attendance at the PART public steering committee meetings, and shared the report's interim recommendations as they were released. Examples are included below in **Figure 3**.

Figure 3. CMAP promoted the PART project on the agency's webpage, newsletter, and social media



Between January and August 2023, PART was featured in ten CMAP newsletters and ten social media posts on each of the agency’s platforms, LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter.

Other organizations engaged their constituencies in the PART project through their social media as well. CMAP also provided the public with updated information about the PART project’s process and content on a dedicated [webpage](#).⁵

What did we hear?

CMAP discerned a number of themes from its engagement through focus groups and stakeholder briefings.

- Public transit is a core service for the residents, visitors, and workers in northeastern Illinois
- Many residents would prefer to use public transit because it is more affordable, but don't have access to public transit
- Current transit services do not meet the needs of many residents, visitors, and workers
- Youth would use more public transit if it were more affordable, frequent, and felt safer
- Riders and prospective riders seek a transit system that is easier to navigate
- The impending fiscal challenge presents a key opportunity to improve the transit system to respond to current and future needs
- Meeting the fiscal challenge will require multiple approaches and options and the burden should be shared equitably

The guidance of stakeholders and the voices of the focus group participants are included in the PART report.

Endnotes

- ¹ Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP), “Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning,” <https://www.cmap.illinois.gov>.
- ² Regional Transportation Authority (RTA), “Transit Is the Answer,” 2022, <https://www.rtachicago.org/uploads/files/general/Region/Strategic-Plan/Final/TransitIsTheAnswer.pdf>.
- ³ Regional Transportation Authority Act, 70 ILCS 3615/5.10(a).
- ⁴ RTA, “Transit is the Answer, Stakeholder Process and Engagement Summary Document,” 2022, [https://www.rtachicago.org/uploads/files/general/Region/Strategic-Plan/Transit is the Answer Stakeholder Process Engagement Summary December2022.pdf](https://www.rtachicago.org/uploads/files/general/Region/Strategic-Plan/Transit%20is%20the%20Answer%20Stakeholder%20Process%20Engagement%20Summary%20December2022.pdf).
- ⁵ CMAP, “Plan of Action for Regional Transit,” 2023, <https://www.cmap.illinois.gov/programs/regional-transit-action>.