



Summary of Eno's Interviews with Transit Stakeholders

June 29, 2023

Introduction

The Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP) convened a steering committee to develop a "Plan of Action for Regional Transit (PART)" with recommendations that can help the Chicago region invest in a stronger and more financially secure transit system. The first meeting of the Steering Committee was held in January 2023, after which the Eno Center for Transportation conducted more than 20 separate interviews with over 35 leaders and experts from community, environmental, labor, and civic organizations as well as transit agency representatives, elected officials, and others identified by CMAP.

The purpose of the interviews was to obtain a range of individual perspectives on the approach to institutional governance for transit in the Chicago region and the funding model with which it is currently working. Eno discussed potential options for reforms with the stakeholders in order to understand the advantages, disadvantages, opportunities, and barriers. These interviews were mostly held in-person though several occurred virtually and some included more than one interviewee (i.e., multiple people at the same organization). Eno staff took notes, but the meetings were not intended not be directly or indirectly attributable to specific individuals in order to enable interviewees to be candid with their responses. In advance of interviews, CMAP provided background information on interviewees including name, relevant organizations work(ed) for, and position within organization.

The interviews were intentionally conversational. Eno generally began with introductions, described the project and Eno's role. Eno asked what the region does well and not well when it comes to transit as well as the advantages and disadvantages of the current governance structure. The benefits and drawbacks of coordination, collaboration, and consolidation were explored as well as intended and unintended consequences. Questions were asked around the state, regional, and local roles as well as the myriad previous efforts for reform. Where possible, interviewees provided examples from other regions, both positive and negative, domestically and abroad.

In this document, the Eno Center summarizes those interviews specifically and thematically within four broad categories: the region's transit system, coordination between the service boards, specific structural recommendations, and political/legislative feasibility for reforms and resources.

1. Overview of Chicago's Regional Transit System

A first order of business was to understand stakeholders' overall perspectives on transit in the Chicago region. These included overall attitudes toward transit generally, and specifically to the overall transit coordinator, the Regional Transportation Authority (RTA), as well as each service board -- the Chicago Transit Authority (CTA), Metra, and Pace.

Regional Transportation Authority (RTA)

The RTA acts as the voice of the regional transit system to public, and state and federal legislators. Interviewees recognize the potential value the RTA could play in transit coordination and integration. The authority does look at the needs of all three service boards and their customers from

a regional perspective. It is adept at balancing the interests of the city and suburbs. For discretionary funding, RTA provides a regional balance and tries to ensure equitable distribution.

Some cited RTA as the key actor being able to keep the peace among services boards after a long period of contention. RTA has ensured that agencies emphasize "state of good repair" and asset management. RTA's strategic planning report, "Transit is the Answer," is viewed fairly positively and should serve as the basis for further regional action. The report was based upon extensive engagement from stakeholders and the public, and identifies challenges and changes in travel patterns. The interviewees did note, however, that it lack specific details and fails to identify priorities.

The RTA has responsibilities relating to planning, operating, and funding public transportation in the region. It has an important role in the allocation of operating and capital funds, providing financial oversight of the service boards, and coordinating provision of public transportation and investment in its facilities. RTA also administers reduced fare permits (seniors, disabled, military) and assesses ADA paratransit eligibility.

While RTA approves the service boards' budgets, it does not have line-item veto over them. This, along with the state's continued earmarking of funds to individual service boards, is considered by many to be a material weakness that makes it very difficult to implement change. In 2008, RTA's responsibilities were enhanced, but it is hampered by super majority approval requirements. At least 12 of the 16 board members must approve the regional strategic plan, capital program, budget, and two-year financial plan. RTA can take on sole responsibility for conducting alternatives analysis and preliminary environmental assessment for any project over \$25 million, but it still needs 12 votes. This super majority requirement protects interests of Chicago, Cook County, and collar counties. Likewise, if Cook County or collar counties unite, they can also wield veto.

As a result, the RTA is highly risk averse and tries to avoid conflict whenever possible and will not act unless all three service boards approve. RTA tends not to tell agencies what to do and instead tries to suggest and convince through collaboration. Agencies sometimes have heated battles over RTA's discretionary funding (which is only a relatively small portion of region's transit funds).

Interviewees felt that RTA often minimizes problems or does not address them (such as CTA's bus reliability problems) and focuses instead on issues that will get the least pushback. For example, when the recovery ratio is in effect, RTA's annual budget and two-year financial plan must show that fares are equal to at least 50 percent of its aggregate costs. Theoretically, this gives RTA the power to determine what recovery ratio each agency must meet, but it has used historic formulas.

Problematically, respondents believe RTA is not taking full advantage of its power to conduct independent and in-depth audits. RTA is supposed to audit the service boards no less than every five years. Such audits may include management, performance, financial, and infrastructure condition audits. For their part, the service boards do not share all their data that RTA needs to perform proper planning.

Overall, suburban stakeholders we interviewed believe that RTA gives urban issues disproportionately more attention and resources than suburban areas. Urban interviewees did not share that concern.

Chicago Transit Authority (CTA)

By far, the most cited positive aspect of the CTA is its excellent geographic coverage throughout the region, particularly its heavy rail lines, as well as the high frequency of service. However, just as frequently cited is the perception of unsafe conditions throughout the CTA network, particularly as it relates to drug use and crime.¹ Real or perceived, the safety issues are pervasive and deep. The concern has worsened since Covid and is deterring riders especially during non-peak periods. This affects both riders and CTA employees.

Although the City of Chicago, rather than the CTA, is responsible for security on the transit system, CTA has hired private unarmed security teams (including some working with dogs) to patrol CTA facilities. Stations and trains were cited as dirty and the connection between homelessness and cleanliness was noted. Overall, there is concern that many CTA rail stations are in dire need of upgrades, modernization, and general improvements. There is a perception that reliability has gotten worse and passengers are frustrated with ghost buses, though most understand the challenges are related to CTA's struggle to hire enough bus operators. It was suggested that the CTA could use empowered and well-trained ambassadors to help customers at stations with fare cards, provide information, and help homeless and those with mental health issues. (O'Hare Airport was cited as a potential model).

Politically, it was widely understood that, for better or worse, CTA is controlled by the mayor of Chicago, who makes decisions about projects and service. Some see CTA as having many patronage jobs, both on staff and the board. The agency is seen as having a low tolerance for risk and remains stagnant, rather than responding dynamically to its existential crises.

Metra

With, by far, the most stations of any other commuter rail system in the country—241—interviewees appreciated the extensiveness of the Metra system. It reaches far into the collar counties and provides considerable service to neighborhoods in the City of Chicago. It has historically done a good job on its core mission to bring workers into the urban core.

Fares are considered very affordable and the stations in the suburbs are in relatively good shape. Many municipalities and local civic groups ensure that stations are well maintained because they are such an important part of their community's economic strength, identity, and history. The system is considered to be safe.

The main concerns focused on the agencies lack of nimbleness. This is partly due to its extensive fixed infrastructure, but it was also noted that Metra has a *railroad* culture and does not think like an operator that tries to identify *innovative transit services*. This hampers its ability to implement new ideas and engage in meaningful partnerships. It does live within its means and has no debt, even though it has the ability to issue debt.

¹ It should be noted that the interviews were conducted during the Chicago mayor's race where crime was a major campaign topic.

It is also considered to be a "tale of two systems" with suburban stations and service largely positive and attractive, but "dreadful" stations in the City of Chicago even though nearly one-third of Metra's stations are in the city. There is a demand for more heavy rail style operations that provides frequent service over short distances throughout the day (i.e., not just concentrated on the morning and evening rush hours.) The fact that Metra must operate within the confines of heavily used freight system was duly noted.

Pace

Pace Suburban Bus covers a massive area that is nearly size of Connecticut and 15 times the size of the City of Chicago. It is considered to be nimble, innovative, and responsive to both local elected officials and its riders.

Pace has implemented creative strategies that bring workers to suburban employers, and works with municipalities and employers to provide bus and vanpool services. It is moving to more demand responsive service including Pace On Demand (reservation-based, shared-ride service in 10 designated service areas), VanGo (drivers and riders can reserve a van for the next business day at 2 Metra stations), and Pace Vanpool (connects individuals to form rideshare arrangement.) Pace is the region's paratransit provider and is using Uber for ADA services so that accessible vehicles are reserved for those needing wheelchairs and other mobility devices. The system is considered safe.

Suburban local governments clearly appreciate dealing with Pace's small bureaucracy. Pace's board members must be a mayor or village president from their respective regions (either current or former) and have a clear understanding of their needs.

There are, however, opportunities to improve connections between suburban train stations and employer locations. The challenges of the "last mile" are pervasive (and it is much more than a mile in many cases). In recent years, ridesharing companies have provided travelers with an alternative to both CTA and Pace bus services. This has diverted some riders from buses to ridesharing services, but this is not a viable option for lower-income riders, many of whom rely on the bus services to access jobs and economic opportunity.

Like the CTA, Pace is having trouble recruiting and retaining bus operators. Buses are often underutilized and there is a recognition that Pace is not getting many people out of their cars. Service frequency on fixed route service is typically only hourly, and service has gotten worse because of service cuts since the pandemic (e.g., fewer feeder services to Metra stations).

2. Perspectives on Regional Transit Coordination

Northeast Illinois is home to three transit operators that are all under the umbrella of a regional transportation body that distributes funding to each agency. Under the right conditions, it would be expected that the Chicago region's planning activities and transit operations would be harmonized, but the stakeholders interviewed by Eno largely believe there are opportunities for the RTA to use its funding authority to effectively push the individual agencies toward regional goals. In part due to RTA's current governance structure, the region has struggled to plan, expand, and coordinate transit service.

To be sure, the region has made limited progress toward regionally integrated transit. For example, the RTA maintains one regional transit map. Several interviewees also noted the successful interagency coordination associated with Pulse (Pace's bus rapid transit), Joliet's new Pace Transit Center, and the Harvey Transportation Center.

Other impactful collaborations were noted. The Fair Transit South Cook County pilot program reduces fares on two Metra lines and increases Pace service on one line. It is a partnership between Cook County, Metra, and Pace to increase accessibility by offering a 50 percent fare reduction on Metra's nearby lines as well as increased service on Pace's nearby routes. On the North Shore Coordination Plan, Pace and CTA jointly worked to improve bus service changes in Evanston area. On fares, Metra monthly pass holders can purchase a \$30 Regional Connect Pass and get unlimited CTA and Pace bus rides. For its part, RTA's Innovation, Coordination and Enhancement (ICE) program, established as part of 2008 reform legislation, funds programs designed to enhance coordination and integration.

Despite these important examples, the vast majority of interviewees felt the region is failing to integrate transit services in a meaningful way. One oft-repeated example is that while riders can use the Ventra Platform for paying transit fares throughout the region, fares are not integrated and fare policies and rates are set independently. Pace and CTA have some overlapping and duplicative bus services in suburban Cook County that could possibly be consolidated but each agency has a parochial interest in keeping their services; for example, CTA wants to be responsive to Cook County since it provides funds for CTA.

Interviewees frequently cited the *competition* between the service boards for riders, funding, and attention. In other words, agencies may have incentive to operate a service if it will help them generate fares and if funding decisions are based upon number of riders. For example, CTA did not participate in Fair Transit South Cook pilot, allegedly because they considered it a threat to the Red Line extension project from 95th Street to 130th Street on the Far South Side.

For other funding, the service boards compete with each other at RTA for discretionary funds. And RTA, Pace, Metra, and CTA each have their own lobbyists in Springfield and may also compete with each other for federal funds. In order to better improve coordination, interviewees noted that RTA needs more sticks and/or carrots to make three agencies work together better.

Interviewees noted a number of benefits of coordination. For example, there needs to be better integrated customer information at stops/stations, buses and trains, web and phone apps. The agencies should provide more and better wayfinding that provides information about all transit services in a particular location. Related to wayfinding, the customer ambassadors could be regional not dedicated to just one service. Pace service could better coordinate with the arrival and departure of Metra trains and one regionally integrated control center could monitor all services so that agencies can more easily modify services to help each other when there is an incident or other disruption.

Fare integration was commonly cited, and ideas included one universal fare card, free transfers, low-income fares, maximum daily or monthly fare for riders of multiple services, and integration with bike sharing. The overwhelming consensus from respondents is that riders should not be relegated to any specific service provider, but should be able to choose which operator best suits

their needs for a particular trip. Transit services could be planned from a regional perspective without first considering the provider, i.e., planners would first identify the need for a new service, then determine (based on costs and various service attributes) who could best provide the service.

Capital projects could be better coordinated to build more bus lanes, bus rapid transit (BRT) lines, and transit centers. Bus traffic signal prioritization should be accelerated by identifying standards, equipment specifications, funding, operational requirements, and priority locations. Regional needs should be emphasized and the way services compete or complement each other should be better considered. The Red Line extension was cited by multiple interviewees as a project that, if planned from a regional perspective, the preferred alternative might be better optimized or Metra could amplify benefits of the proposed project.

It was also suggested that the RTA could have the authority to close down or consolidate some stations that are underused, provide duplicative services, and are in poor condition. For example, Metra has some flag stop stations where trains only stop if passengers are visible. They could be replaced with improved consolidated stations and services.

3. Structural Recommendations

Eno probed stakeholders to understand their position on potential recommendations for how to address challenges and opportunities with the service boards and RTA, as well as better integration overall. Six categories of recommendations are described below (note, these recommendations are not mutually exclusive.)

Tolls and Transit

Interviewees recommended three discrete options for bringing together toll roads and transit in the region:

1. Merge the Illinois State Toll Highway Authority (ISTHA) with RTA and use tolls to subsidize transit.
2. Illinois Tollway could remain separate from RTA, but tolls would help subsidize transit.
3. Tolls could be added to some state-owned highways that are currently free, and tolls used for transit.

Interviewees felt that the key advantage of merging the Illinois Tollway with RTA is that toll funding might be more reliable. If the tolling agency is separate, the legislature may be more likely to change funds allocated to transit. They were also concerned that if the Illinois Tollway subsidizes transit, it might have to raise tolls and/or ask legislators for funding.

Eno did not find much interest from interviewees for the region to develop a congestion pricing zone. The general feeling was that it would deter people from going to Chicago and that it would hurt low-income households who do not have reliable transit access.

Eliminate RTA and Transfer its Central Functions

The clear advantage of eliminating RTA would be that it would take away a level of bureaucracy. However, a number of potential problems were identified. For one, the service boards would need to assume RTA's role and administer reduced fare permits and assess ADA paratransit eligibility. There would also be no organization to administer the regional tax. Respondents would still want an agency to hold the service boards accountable. There was also concern that no agency would speak on behalf of all agencies to the public, Springfield, and advocacy groups.

Interviewees felt strongly that, without RTA, there would certainly be less consistency and coordination among agencies in the region.

Merge RTA & CMAP without strengthening RTA

Given there is overlap between appointees to RTA and CMAP boards, and their structures are similar, it was suggested that the RTA and CMAP could be merged. The possible end result would be that two regional bodies would be more successful advocating for, and implementing, regional priorities. It was generally felt that there are some opportunities for efficiencies, although savings might be minimal and the benefits are hard to quantify. Such a merger would add other modes to considerations about transit (e.g., walking and biking as both complementary and competing modes). It could also potentially tie in the land use connection, although CMAP does not make land use decisions, its studies could contribute to decision-making of other organizations.

On the other hand, while the service boards would still be able to keep their focus on operations, it might undermine CMAP's ability to plan. As a separate planning organization, it can take a more strategic and objective view see what's happening on more macro level because it is not focused on day-to-day services.

Strengthening RTA with more and enhanced powers

Interviewees suggested several potential ways to strengthen RTA including giving it the power to approve hiring (and possibly firing) of the service boards' executive directors. In this way, the agencies' executive directors could be required to answer to the RTA board in a more formal way. It was also recommended that RTA should have the resources and autonomy to conduct in-depth and independent audits, whereas today the audits are episodic, and the service boards do not readily contribute sufficient data and information.

RTA could also be given greater discretion in allocation of funds with less emphasis on mandated formulas. As for spending, RTA could be given veto power over line items in agencies' budgets and authority to approve certain types of contracts that are regional in nature (e.g., contracts with lobbyists).

The authority's voting procedures also generated comments from the interviewees. For example, some felt that the super majority requirements could be changed, such as when RTA conducts alternatives analysis and preliminary environmental assessment for any project over \$25 million. It was suggested that the dollar threshold could be raised to account for inflation since it was first

enacted. The super majority requirement for approval of RTA's strategic plan, capital program, budget, and two-year financial plan could be changed to a simple majority.

The clear advantage of strengthening RTA is in providing it with accountability along with meaningful governance and budgetary oversight. Doing so might enable RTA to do a better job on discrete tasks such as establishing bus lanes and BRT, integrating customer information, building more transit centers, designing and installing wayfinding, integrating fares, coordinating and consolidating services. Importantly, the transit network could be redesigned and enhanced by looking at all services together, across the region, and transit could speak with one voice and not separately and in competition with each other. It may also result in better and more informed studies and report cards on status, problems, and issues (e.g., safety).

Interviewees did express concern, however, that a large agency with a bigger bureaucracy would not be as nimble or efficient in its decision making. City advocates are concerned that a stronger RTA would take away its control of CTA, and suburban representatives worry that a stronger RTA would shift more resources to city. Board relationships were also questioned as to whether a stronger RTA would make it more difficult for the board to determine what gets the most attention and funds. The concern is that board members would have more battles over allocating funds.

Merge all service boards into RTA

A weightier recommendation was brought up by several interviewees to eliminate all three service boards and have RTA Board responsible for all the services that CTA, Metra, and Pace currently provide. Variations included merging all the service boards along with, or into, the Tollway, or else just merge one or two agencies and leave the others independent.

The general benefit of such realignment was suggested to be potential savings in operations, personnel, and back-office functions like procurement, legal, marketing, etc. The concerns are similar to those raised with a strengthened RTA (above), the true quantification of the benefits of doing so, and whether the advantages of having separate boards focus specifically on one mode would be lost.

Increased state role in regional transit governance

Unlike major metropolitan areas like New York and Boston, the state does not play a significant role in transportation governance in the Chicago region. Interviewees expressed a range of different opinions as to whether the state role should be enhanced, often focused on the existing leaders in the executive and legislative branches. Their opinions on the state role are largely aligned with their opinions of these leaders.

Those who thought the state should be enhanced suggested giving the governor the power to appoint members to the RTA board. Doing so might improve accountability and, as a result, the state might be more willing to provide more funding. Illinois DOT already plays a major role in planning and funding of downstate transit operators.

On the other hand, several interviewees expressed concerns about the governor interfering with the region's priorities (e.g., "we're better off dealing with folks in the Chicago region than a governor who has to please downstate and upstate.") One interviewee suggested that a greater state role is inevitable, especially if the state will provide additional funding or if toll revenues are tapped, and it would be better for the region to define what that role looks like, rather than state officials. State control over transit agencies might make transit services subject to whims of a new administration, which may result in board members changing more frequently with a loss of institutional knowledge.

4. Political Support for Reforms and Resources

Everyone Eno interviewed was largely careful to couch their comments in the context of the political and legislative realities. The PART report itself—and the Steering Committee's recommendations—need to pass both the CMAP board and its MPO Policy Committee before they can go to the legislature.

Regarding Springfield, the concern among respondents is that it is difficult to get legislators to focus on transit. There is no functioning transit caucus today and legislators outside of Northeast Illinois are not known for focusing on Chicago issues that do not concern their own districts. In addition, experts we interviewed felt that the state electeds are routinely resistant to major change and policy moves.

Within the region, the concern is in potentially asking suburban constituents to pay more in taxes when they already feel that they are not getting proportionate share of the region's transit service. As noted, the suburbs may feel that a stronger RTA might emphasize CTA needs. At the same time, the city of Chicago may feel that they are losing control of CTA, if RTA is strengthened. Similarly, shifting funds from highways would be problematic because deferred maintenance on highways has led to a backlog of work. With motor fuel tax declining, road builders will fight to protect highway funds from going to transit.

Interviewees also expressed concern that the legislators will only focus on immediate financial problem facing transit in the Chicago region, and not look at structural changes. As a result, any optimization efforts would get resistance. If the Steering Committee's plans include consolidating services or stations, the plan would have to emphasize how communities would gain.

To gain support for bold reforms, interviewees felt it was important to explain the fiscal cliff the region is facing as well as transit's benefits to the economy, equity, mobility, environment, quality of life. Data and evidence should show how metropolitan Chicago compares to other places (state funding, debt levels, farebox recovery, etc.), as well as scenarios of what happens if the fiscal crisis is not addressed.

Success will likely be determined if a solution can be found where "everybody wins": city, Cook County suburbs, collar counties and downstate. Doing so will require transit champions from the business community as well as some quick fixes so when legislation is introduced there is a better perception of transit in the statehouse. Legislators need confidence that transit agencies are (or will be) well managed, transparent, and accountable, and that agencies will still be responsive to needs of cities and counties. Some respondents believed strongly that Metra is key to this battle, given its

historic role and the challenges with commuter rail post-pandemic. In previous eras, CTA has been the agency facing financial crisis.

Gaining broad support also means tying the work into other important discussions happening in the region, such as social equity and inclusion. Since a major factor that prevents many people from getting ahead is a lack of transportation, if people can't get to work, the state has to spend more on human services. Transit reforms could also be more explicitly connected to meeting goals for reducing greenhouse gas emissions. It could also be connected to other transportation specific initiatives such as expanding inter-city Amtrak service or electric vehicles that would benefit communities across the state.

5. Summary

Most interviewees noted how fortunate the region is to have such an extensive transit network with many rail lines in the city, extending into the inner-ring suburbs and beyond. The region was literally built on the frame of the rail network which enabled growth to be concentrated around transit hubs and, later, for the network to enable residents to reach jobs and opportunities in the suburbs via Pace. Interviewees felt strongly that the Chicago region's identity is related to transit and a key reason for its attractiveness is it allows people move to Chicago because they can live a car-free lifestyle across multiple income levels. A common theme was that the region is fortunate to already have in place what other cities and metropolitan areas are spending billions to create.

There was broad recognition and acute understanding of the nuanced regional governance structure and the funding balance which is currently acceptable to suburbs and city. This détente is due, in part, to the leadership at the three service boards who, it was noted, are all transportation professionals. One respondent specifically cited they are the best that the region has had going back to 1974. The agencies have stemmed the recent conflicts between them and nearly everyone interviewed admitted they are getting along better than ever.

Supporting the service boards and their leaders are highly-engaged and well-regarded civic organizations and transportation advocacy organizations that develop plans and recommendations, and also generate support, and provide political cover for change. There is deep regional knowledge of the importance of long-term comprehensive planning.

The major concerns focused on funding and levels of coordination, especially in light of the post-pandemic transit challenges. It is a chronically under-funded transit system and several respondents, especially those involved in transit operations, believe many of its problems can be fixed with more money. That said, there may be a need to change formulas and allocation of funding sources, as well as the farebox recovery ratio requirement which was suspended after the pandemic-related ridership declines. Several individuals felt that there should be a tighter connection between revenue provided and benefits received, especially from the suburban counties who believe they should get service commensurate with the taxes they pay. At the same time, there was general awareness that the Chicago region spends one of the least amounts per capita on transit, compared to its peer regions.

The funding challenges are exacerbated by the increased costs related to providing transit service, post-COVID as well as the changing travel patterns that result from people working remotely. The

Chicago region's transit system is structured around a network designed to bring people to jobs in Chicago, less so suburb to suburb commuting and other non-traditional commute patterns.

While there is clear recognition of better and newfound working relationships between the leadership at the service boards, the interactions between the staff at the agencies still seem more defensive and parochial. The ongoing lack of coordination was repeatedly cited as an intractable problem preventing meaningful progress toward a truly integrated transit system. The region has pervasive divides between suburbs and city, and between rail and bus services.

Beyond the service boards, it was noted that the Chicago region does not just have three transit agencies. It also has dozens of bus providers including those operated by municipalities, recreation departments, counties, and universities. The region also needs to integrate planning for ridesharing, bikes, and micromobility like electric scooters. The Chicago region might benefit from having a commuter agency or transportation management association (TMA) to promote ridesharing and other programs. (The TMA of Lake-Cook is a not-for-profit business association that was specifically cited as a potential model given its work with employers.)

Unfortunately, interviewees felt the region is missing the powerful transit champions it previously enjoyed. Transit does not seem to be a priority of any senior elected leader now, which is historically atypical for the region. For its part, the state government has only a limited role regarding transit and it does not appear to be a high priority. Similarly, there is no longer a functioning transit caucus in the state legislature.

Some interviewees lamented the fact that the Chicago region does not have standards and metrics that link transit with service levels, equity, and the economy. As a result, riders are accustomed to mediocre services and facilities.