

Pyke: How to make the most of suburban transit

By Marni Pyke | January 1, 2015

Although the car is supposedly king in the suburbs, national trends indicate people are driving less. The spectrum ranges from millennials who prefer transit to aging baby boomers who are giving up their cars.

Fortunately, there are a lot more options out there for car-free travelers in the suburbs.

Metra runs 11 lines, serving people in Cook and the collar counties with more than 81 million passenger trips a year.

The route with the most express trains is the BNSF Line, which serves Naperville and Lisle.

Other popular lines are Metra's Union Pacific North, Northwest and West lines, which connect Chicago to Lake, McHenry and Kane counties, respectively.

Most Metra routes offer weekend service although the North Central Service does not.

The other transit workhorse in the 'burbs is Pace, the bus service that travels from Alsip to Zion.

Pace has become a nimbler system in recent years, downsizing some of its buses to suit ridership and bucking convention with van pools options and commuter shuttles to Metra stations.

And both Metra and Pace offer transport to Chicago, where the Chicago Transit Authority covers the big city like a glove.

Paying for trips is easier now that Pace and the CTA have joined forces to offer a regional fare card called Ventra.

Ventra cards can be purchased online, at CTA stations and at a host of retailers including Jewel/Osco. Riders can load value onto the cards at stations and online or by phone, then travel cash-free on buses and CTA trains. For more info, go to <https://www.ventrachicago.com/>.

Metra is expected to provide a smartphone Ventra app that allows passengers to purchase tickets on its trains in 2015.

If you want advice planning a trip, all three transit agencies have websites with schedules and routes. And the Regional Transportation Authority provides a trip-finder service dubbed Goroo at <http://tripsweb.rtachicago.com/index.htm>.

The Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning is on a mission to increase transit ridership and offer options in underserved areas in the region.

"A robust, well-functioning transportation network, including transit, is critical to quality of life for the region's residents, as well as the economic success of the region as a whole," principal policy analyst Elizabeth Schuh said.

"Transit access varies widely across the region's suburbs," she said, adding that can be improved through land-use, improving the transit system and adding choices like pedestrian and bike connections to transit stops.