

Chicago Tribune

Pace unveils plan for ambitious \$2.3 billion Rapid Transit Network

Richard Wronski | January 21, 2015

A wide-ranging network of suburban bus routes could transform the way people commute and shop, connecting people to job centers in Naperville, Elgin and Elk Grove Village, according to an ambitious \$2.3 billion plan shared by Pace on Tuesday.

Express buses with high-tech amenities would take riders from the south suburbs to O'Hare International Airport. Or from McHenry south to Oswego via Randall Road. Or from Evanston to O'Hare along Dempster Street.

And buses would travel on the shoulder of the Jane Addams and Edens expressways, bypassing car traffic.

These bus routes, and dozens of others like them, could provide new public transit options for thousands of riders in scores of communities in the six-county area.

"The basis in providing this service is safe, fast, on-time and frequent," said Pace Executive Director T.J. Ross. "What people want is to be able to know they are going faster than cars."

Pace has submitted its plan for an innovative suburban Rapid Transit Network to Congress, which asked for candidates for a program called Projects of National and Regional Significance. The agency revealed details of its proposal to the Tribune on Tuesday.

The proposed network combines elements of Pace's long-standing regional plan along with more recent strategies for putting mass transit on new or rebuilt tollways.

Pace's aim is to essentially "change the suburban transit environment," said David Tomzik, the agency's manager of long-range planning.

The network is composed of two service types: arterial bus rapid transit and suburban expressway service.

The goal is to tap a larger pool of federal funding that would normally be available for mass transit projects and get the network built much faster than using smaller grants or local funds, officials said.

Pace admits the cost is unrealistic to expect the federal government to pay these days, due to the inability of Congress to agree on a long-term transportation funding measure. But Pace officials say

it's worth the effort to take Congress up on its invitation to submit a viable proposal and compete for any federal money that might come available.

The arterial bus rapid transit system, or ART, operates in mixed traffic on regular roadways, as opposed to a bus in its own exclusive lane, like the CTA's plan for Ashland Avenue in Chicago. Pace proposes the creation of 24 ART routes on 655 miles of roads from McHenry to Will counties. The service would be known as Pulse, and would use specially branded buses. Pulse stations along routes would offer upgrades from local service, and buses would have enhancements like Wi-Fi and real-time travel information.

ART buses can cut travel time by using what's known as "transit signal priority" to let buses through intersections if traffic conditions permit it. Pace's computerized location and performance system communicates electronically with the traffic signal system to either extend a green light or shorten a red light by a few seconds if the bus is operating behind schedule, spokesman Patrick Wilmot said.

It's not a manual system operated by drivers, nor is it a preemption system like those used by first responders. If traffic would be hurt by a bus request for quicker clearance of the intersection, the request is denied and the normal signal timing remains in place.

Other enhancements include changes and improvements to passenger amenities to speed the boarding process and featuring limited stops, roughly every half-mile.

Service between ART stations would remain available via local bus routes making all stops, Pace said.

Pace already plans to introduce ART on the Milwaukee Avenue corridor from the Jefferson Park Transit Center in Chicago to Golf Mill Shopping Center in Niles. It hopes to follow this with ART service on Dempster Street.

Suburban expressway service would be expanded on 11 highways, similar to Pace's Bus on Shoulders service on the Stevenson Expressway (I-55). There, Pace buses use the expressway shoulders as a passing lane when traffic is slower than 35 mph.

In the three years since shoulder operations began, Pace says there has been significant improvements in ridership, travel times and on-time performance.

"As a result, we believe that we can replicate that success on other highways and tollways through service that's considerably faster and more convenient than driving alone and sitting in traffic congestion," Wilmot said.

Average daily ridership on the two bus routes that operate between the southwest suburbs and Chicago has grown to nearly 1,000, an increase of about 226 percent since the pilot program began in 2011, officials said.

In addition to higher ridership, on-time performance is consistently better than 90 percent, compared with 68 percent before the start of the project, officials said.

Pace also hopes to add the same service to the Edens Expressway. The Illinois Department of Transportation is conducting an analysis of the Edens shoulders between Foster Avenue and Lake Cook Road.

"Preliminary results show it is feasible," Tomzik said.

As part of the Illinois Tollway's ongoing Addams rebuilding project, the shoulders are being widened to allow Pace buses to use them when traffic is congested. The wider shoulders on the Addams could be converted to bus-only lanes if needed in the future, officials said.

The price tag of \$2.3 billion includes the buses and garages to support the service, as well as the technology and infrastructure necessary, Pace said.

By way of comparison, the network would serve the entire six-county area, whereas the once-hoped-for STAR Line would have primarily served only the northwest and far west suburbs. That suburb-to-suburb rail link, with an estimated cost of at least \$1 billion, has been essentially discarded due to lack of funding.

Steve Schlickman, executive director of the University of Illinois at Chicago's Urban Transportation Center, lauded Pace's effort in going after the federal program, despite the scarcity of federal funding likely to result.

"It's a bold move on the part of Pace, and I'm glad they are thinking big," Schlickman said. "The majority of people live in the suburbs, and most travel suburb-to-suburb, which are not served well by public transit.

"I think this is an idea long in coming and should be tried."