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RTA report: Metra, Pace, CTA falling behind in funding for equipment

By Richard Wronski | January 22, 2015

RTA report: Capital needs have risen by $3 billion in last year, but funding is scarce, officials say.

Chicago's three transit agencies have fallen $3 billion further behind previous years in investing in new equipment and maintaining existing trains, buses and infrastructure, a new report by the Regional Transportation Authority said Thursday.

The report was unveiled on the same day that the RTA announced the start of a $5 million marketing campaign "using humor" to attract new riders to public transit.

The "Ride On" campaign is using ads on cable TV, digital billboards and travel websites to tout the benefits of taking buses and trains versus driving on Chicago's expressways, officials said. One TV ad shows a car weaving in traffic while the driver is taking off a sweatshirt. A passenger on a bus in the next lane warily watches. Another ad shows cars inching along in congestion.

The new report, meanwhile, uses 84 pages of charts and data to paint a gloomy picture of the capital funding situation at the CTA, Metra and Pace.

The transit agencies spend state and federal funds to keep the fleets of buses and trains running while maintaining structures like bridges, rails and facilities.

Together, the three agencies need $36 billion over the next decade to address these needs, according to the RTA's Capital Asset Condition Assessment. That amount has grown by $3 billion since a similar analysis a year ago, the report said.

"The current rate of annual reinvestment is insufficient to address the region's normal (equipment) replacement needs, leading to … growth in the size of the investment backlog and an associated decline in overall asset conditions," the report said.

The CTA accounts for 62 percent of the regional capital funding needs, while Metra's share is 32.4 percent, and Pace's is 6.3 percent, the report says.

Much of the total amount cited in the report, about $19.5 billion, represents a "backlog" of investment that the transit agencies have been deferring over the years, the report said.

While the need has grown, less funding has been coming from Springfield and Washington, officials say.

The report estimates that federal and state funding for capital needs will range from $563 million to $765 million annually over the next 20 years. This is half of what will be needed to keep the backlog from growing, the report says.

RTA Chairman Kirk Dillard said he planned to call transit officials together as a "working group" to urge lawmakers in Springfield and Washington, as well as new Gov. Bruce Rauner, to address the need for more funding.

"We must start addressing the backlog," Dillard said. "We don't want the backlog to snowball bigger and bigger."

Board member Dwight Magalis of Lake County called the report a "great document," which officials could use to argue that a new source of transit funding is needed.

But Blake Hobson, who represents McHenry County, said he thought the report was misleading. The numbers should be presented in a "more realistic way" that the public could better grasp, he said.

"This paints a picture worse than it actually is," Hobson said.

The report notes that vehicles used by the CTA, Metra and Pace travel more miles than ones operated by peer agencies in other cities without experiencing major mechanical failures. This comes even though 30 percent of those vehicles have reached their "minimum useful life" as defined by federal standards.

The report acknowledges that given the volume of infrastructure needs, it is neither "financially or physically feasible" to eliminate the backlog over a single 10-year period.