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Online maps will outline Chicago-area's transportation woes, need for money

Jon Hilkevitch | January 26, 2015



This Metra underpass in Chicago, at Armitage and Ashland aveunes, is an example of infrastructure in need of updating. (Phil Velasquez, Chicago Tribune)

Taking a look at the cost of under-investment in transportation.

A website launching Monday will turn wonkish government data into interactive maps on the quality of bridges, roads and rail transportation across Cook and six other counties with the intention of rousing the public to push for costly upgrades and expansions.

The **Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning** created the site because it contends that northeastern Illinois' deteriorating transportation network costs the area billions of dollars a year and that renewing and expanding it will require an unprecedented financial commitment.

"In making the case for investment in the system, we feel strongly about the need for decisions to be based on data and that the public will support these investments if there is real tangible benefit," said Tom Garritano, the agency's communications chief and director of the online project. "The

website wasn't set up for data geeks, but to take what the data geeks do, make it accessible to other people and help convince decision-makers about the need for these investments."

The site, <http://www.cmap.illinois.gov/mobility/explore>, includes a series of maps concerning roads, transit and rail. From each topic, a person can click in to see more specific data, such as the condition of specific bridges, delays at railroad crossings and countywide assessments of road quality.

Officials at CMAP contend that drivers and transit riders across the Chicago area are already paying a hefty price every day as a result of deferred investment, navigating through traffic congestion on crumbling roads and bridges, and enduring long walks to bus stops and train stations as well as missed connections that lengthen commuting times.

How bad is it? Congestion on the roads is costing the area more than \$7 billion annually in wasted fuel and losses in worker productivity, according to CMAP.

And consider that the high volume of freight trains clogging the area's outdated rail infrastructure causes about 7,800 hours of delay each weekday for more than 380,000 motorists at railroad crossings, CMAP said.

The worst location for crossing delays in the area is at the tracks across **Morgan Street** near **40th Street** in Chicago, according to 2011 data that CMAP received from the **Illinois Commerce Commission**. At that location, the average gate-down time is 13 minutes, causing almost 3,200 drivers a day to waste an average of 384 hours.

Rail crossings in Chicago accounted for 41 percent of motorist delays in the area. Next highest on the list were crossings in **La Grange**, **Des Plaines**, **Blue Island** and **Downers Grove**, according to the ICC.

The new online tool, which is essentially a collection of data-driven visualizations, was created by CMAP to engage the public about the need for Illinois to step up the commitment to repair and modernize the transportation system in the Chicago area, Garritano said.

One section of the website, addressing the condition of area roads, reports that in **Cook County** the ride quality of the pavement is rated as unacceptable on more than half of the major arterial streets. CMAP set a goal to reach a 90 percent acceptable rate across the area on major arterial roads by 2040.

On another index, almost 10 percent of the more than 3,400 bridges in the Chicago area contain at least one load-bearing section that is in poor condition, requiring more frequent inspections to ensure the bridges are still safe and in some cases restrictions on the weight of vehicles permitted to cross, the website said.

"Our great interest is to take this newly available data and try to say, well, based on this, for the entire seven-county region we can really tell where the needs are," said Jesse Elam, principal planner at CMAP. "That's something that in the past we really couldn't do very well."

The call for more public involvement in transportation investment decisions is being made as Congress has deferred action on passing a new multi-year transportation funding bill and while elected officials in Illinois are deciding whether there will be a new state capital-improvement

program. The **American Society of Civil Engineering** gave the nation's highways a grade of "D" in 2013 and said poor roadway conditions cost each driver an average of \$324 annually in extra repairs and operating costs.

Meanwhile, the federal **Highway Trust Fund** is running out of money. The fund includes accounts that provide road construction and public transit funding to the states via the 18.4 cents-per-gallon federal gas tax, which hasn't been increased since 1993. Over the past 20 years, vehicles have become more fuel efficient, Americans are driving less and the cost of road construction has gone up.

The gas tax generates about \$34 billion annually, but the **U.S. Department of Transportation** spends about \$50 billion per year on road and transit projects to basically maintain the existing state of repair, according to transportation experts. The Highway Trust Fund has been kept solvent through temporary funding that is set to expire in May.

Locally, the **Chicago Transit Authority**, **Metra** and **Pace** have fallen \$3 billion further behind previous years in investing in new equipment and maintaining the transit system, according to a report released last week by the **Regional Transportation Authority**. The three agencies now need a total of \$36.1 billion over the next decade to address capital-improvement shortfalls, in large part due to deferred investment in the system, the RTA said.

CMAP officials have called on the state to create a series of user fees to generate new revenue. They include implementing express toll lanes that carry higher tolls during rush hours to better manage traffic, and increasing the 19 cents-per-gallon state motor fuel tax by 8 cents in the short term, as part of a plan to invest more strategically in transportation.

The need for new funding sources is growing, CMAP officials said. The agency's executive director, Randy Blankenhorn, will likely get an opportunity to advance the funding conversation. Gov. Bruce Rauner has nominated Blankenhorn to serve as secretary of the **Illinois Department of Transportation**.