



City must invest in mass transit

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Officials from Africa's five richest nations are coming to Chicago at the end of the month to see how transportation can make a city successful. Chicago still has a reputation as a city whose economic strength was built atop an effective transportation system.

But if those African officials look closely, they'll see a regional transit system that is struggling. It needs about \$20 billion just to catch up with deferred maintenance and replacement and will need another \$13.4 billion over the next decade to keep pace.

And simply catching up won't be good enough, especially for Chicago's booming downtown. Chicago's downtown renewal will suffocate in coming years without significant transit improvements, planners said Wednesday at a transportation workshop hosted by the Chicago Central Area Committee, whose members include leaders of many of the city's businesses, universities and cultural institutions.

That's something the region can't afford. Transportation is Chicago's foundation, and great cities tackle their greatest challenges, even when money is tight. Chicago needs to find a better way to move people around, which means new investments in high-capacity public transit.

Some downtown efforts are underway. Using a federal grant and tax increment financing funds, Chicago is designing a \$32 million downtown bus rapid transit line to connect the Near West Side commuter rail stations to Michigan Avenue. Service is expected to begin next year.

But more is needed, and new ways to pay for it must be found. And don't look only to Springfield or Washington. The state is struggling to get its own finances in order, and this week Congress failed to provide long-term financing for the federal fund that pays for highway and transit programs. The House instead sent a short-term fix to the Senate.

But state and federal problems are no excuse for standing still. Chicago should prioritize a proposed transit line to run along the Chicago River bank, connecting the Union Station and the Ogilvie Transportation Center to North Michigan Avenue, either along existing streets or using an abandoned rail right-of-way.

Another new service discussed Wednesday: a lakefront public transit line to link downtown to the museum campus and McCormick Place that would run on a right-of-way now dedicated to private bus routes. Eventually, it could run all the way to the Far Southeast Side.

For those and other projects, downtown property owners who would benefit could help pay for it through special service areas, transit districts or other new funding. New York, for example, used such techniques to pay for a \$2 billion rail extension without relying on federal or state money.

Steve Schlickman, executive director of the Urban Transportation Center at the University of Illinois at Chicago, says representatives of downtown businesses and other institutions he has talked to strongly support the need for better public transit and are open to finding ways to help pay for it, "Any major rail expansion has to find a way to primarily pay for itself through the area where it is being built," Schlickman says.

Chicago was founded as a transportation center because it linked the Mississippi River watershed to the Great Lakes. It maintained its edge by developing into a rail and then an aviation center. A strong transit system is an advantage Chicago must find a way to keep.