

Chicago Tribune

Union Station plan could bring relief for Metra, Amtrak passengers

By Richard Wronski

For many of the 120,000 rail passengers who pass through each day, Union Station is either a mystifying maze of ramps and escalators, or a perplexing funnel that forces them to navigate perilously narrow platforms.

Commuting challenges include dodging water from leaky roofs and trying not to breathe diesel fumes too deeply.

Officials from the Chicago Department of Transportation, Amtrak, Metra and other agencies have been working since 2010 on a master plan to improve the station and make commuting easier.

In an update Wednesday, officials provided a glimpse of both short-term fixes, mainly better access to CTA buses, and proposals for long-term enhancements. Planners are studying ways to reconfigure the building last remodeled in 1992 by its owner, Amtrak, to accommodate more trains and passengers and improve the flow of foot traffic.

The station is like a “warren of obscure passageways with no natural light,” said Marc Magliari, Amtrak’s manager of media relations.

Jeffrey Sriver, planning director for the Chicago Department of Transportation, said work will be underway in 2015 on two projects that will produce an immediate benefit for commuters.

The first is the addition of dedicated lanes on Canal St. to improve access to CTA buses.

The second will be the construction of an off-street bus terminal on Jackson Blvd. between Canal and Clinton streets. to provide direct, weather-protected connections between the station and CTA buses while also relieving congestion on nearby streets.

Longer-term improvements include converting unused platforms so they can be used by commuters and Amtrak. Tracks would be realigned to accommodate wider platforms and new stairways so passengers can exit without using the concourse.

No major changes are planned for the historic Great Hall, which dates to 1925 and is the site of the iconic stairway scene in the 1987 movie “The Untouchables.”

Amtrak predicts growth in ridership, most immediately from additional trips serving Downstate and the Rockford-Quad Cities area, and from the development of high-speed rail, said Joe Shacter, director of public and intermodal transportation for the Illinois Department of Transportation.

David Kralik, Metra's head of long-range planning, acknowledged the congestion caused by service disruptions, particularly involving BNSF trains that use the station's south concourse. The BNSF is the busiest of Metra's 11 lines.

BNSF commuters experienced another jam-packed evening rush hour Tuesday when signal problems forced Metra to cancel two trains. Crowds extended up the escalators and into the station's food court level.

To ease the pressure, Metra has tried to encourage passengers to wait in the Great Hall during delays. "There's just not enough space for everyone," Kralik said.

As he caught a BNSF train Wednesday afternoon, longtime rider Mark O'Brien, 62, said any changes that would mean wider platforms and eased congestion in the concourse would be a welcome relief. "When they have train delays, it's actually dangerous in there," O'Brien said.