

Chicago Tribune

Revamp of Loop traffic, bus-only route and bike lanes moving forward

Jon Hilkevich | September 29, 2014

The Emanuel administration will announce Monday that it is seeking bids to construct three long-planned transit projects aimed at providing faster and more reliable service for hundreds of thousands of daily commuters and city visitors who ride CTA buses and **Loop** elevated trains in the increasingly gridlocked central business district.

Work will begin early next year on a Central Loop bus rapid transit system, a **Union Station Transit Center** and a **Washington/Wabash** CTA Loop elevated station, according to the **Chicago Department of Transportation**.

The three projects follow numerous false starts dating back 50 years, including attempts to expand Chicago's subway system and build an "urban circulator" street car network anchored in the Loop.

The cornerstone of the \$150 million plan that officials say will be funded mostly through federal grants is a commitment to a downtown bus priority system, made up of a series of dedicated bus-only lanes linking to commuter rail stations.

Traffic signals will be programmed to give buses a jump on other traffic at intersections and reduce bus travel times. A total of eight rapid transit-style bus stations will be built on **Madison** and **Washington streets** to speed passenger boarding for trips along the route, which includes Union Station.

The CTA estimates the average time savings per passenger at 7.5 minutes for trips that are generally a mile or less through downtown — and painfully slow under current conditions.

In addition, new traffic patterns on **Canal** and **Clinton streets** will reorder the chaotic and often dangerous mix of pedestrians, bicyclists, private cars, cabs, CTA buses, shuttle buses serving office buildings as well as long-distance intercity buses. Traffic patterns will be coordinated with bus movements in and out of the three-lane bus transit center to be built just south of Union Station, according to the plan, which city transportation officials shared with the Tribune.

The changes will result in an average of one fewer general travel lane for cars on four downtown streets and a reduction, still undergoing tweaks, in on-street parking, officials said, adding that they are open to making adjustments sometime after the new system is launched next year.

At least two general traffic lanes will be maintained on all streets, and all parking garages and alleys will remain accessible, officials said. In its pitch to the public, transportation officials also say that left and right turns will be improved at most intersections by adding more turn arrows, and that bus queue jump signals allowing buses to get out in front of traffic will be activated only when a bus is present.

The new street layout marks a historic rebalancing of how the public way will be used for decades to come, city officials said. Chicago, like other metro areas across the U.S., is clearly prioritizing the role of transit and alternate travel choices over traditional car traffic as a way to unclog streets, improve air quality and stimulate the economy by luring back businesses, shoppers and residents who over the years migrated to the suburbs.

The effort's direct focus is to draw more people to higher-quality mass transit service, improve conditions for pedestrians and expand the city's network of bicycle lanes, including installation of the first eastbound protected bike lane in the Loop, on Washington Street. A new protected bike lane also will be built on **Randolph Street**, replacing the existing bike lane on Madison, officials said.

"This project isn't just about downtown," Mayor Rahm Emanuel said. "We're extending the reach of transit to Chicago neighborhoods and to the entire region."

The improvements are designed to make it more convenient and safer for the public to combine bus and rail trips with bicycling and walking; generate more foot traffic for retailers in the central business district; and enhance downtown's overall environment for businesses and their employees, according to city officials.

Drivers will continue to be accommodated, regardless of the emphasis on other areas, said Chicago Transportation Commissioner Rebekah Scheinfeld.

"This is a regional solution that benefits CTA riders and Metra riders as well as people who are driving because they don't want to deal with it," she said.

"But I would also say, try using the other options. We are providing affordable and effective alternatives, whether it's taking Metra and a bus across the Loop, taking the CTA and doing Divvy (bike-share) for that last mile or riding your own bike all the way," she said.

She acknowledged various interests are competing to use a limited resource: downtown pavement.

"We are trying to balance all the demands in an innovative, efficient and safe way to channel all the different users through the limited downtown roadway space that we have," Scheinfeld said. "It is a balance."

A summary providing key details of each project follows:

Bus Rapid Transit

The bus rapid transit system in the central Loop will be used by about 1,000 buses each weekday and serve a projected 25,000 riders, according to CDOT and the CTA.

Buses on six CTA routes, making limited stops along buses-only lanes, will operate on **Washington, Madison, Clinton** and **Canal streets** between **Michigan Avenue** on the east and the **Ogilvie Transportation Center** and Union Station on the west.

Washington and Madison will each have four wheelchair-accessible rapid-transit-style bus stations where passengers will board from platforms level with bus floors. The CTA plans to introduce prepayment at the **Madison/Dearborn** station to speed up boarding. Eventually, all the weather-protected stations will be outfitted with fare gates to facilitate prepayment, transit officials said.

CTA buses operating downtown currently average less than 5 mph, according to the CTA, which is expecting a 25 percent time savings eastbound between Union Station and Michigan Avenue and a 15 percent time improvement westbound from Michigan to Union Station.

Although ongoing city plans to introduce bus rapid transit on **Ashland Avenue** have faced stiff opposition from some residents and business owners, officials said that in the downtown area a more efficient use of buses is critical to easing congestion. They point out that buses currently carry 47 percent of the people traveling in vehicles on portions of Washington and Madison and that while 56 percent of people on the two streets walk to their destinations, the downtown has stretched beyond easy walking distance for many trips.

Under the plan, right turns by cars will be restricted at four locations to maintain bus speeds, improve overall traffic flow and protect pedestrians and bicyclists, officials said. The locations are Washington onto **LaSalle Street**, Madison onto Dearborn, Madison onto **Wacker Drive** and **Jackson Boulevard** onto Canal.

As part of the plan, the CTA and CDOT are also studying options to reroute eastbound bus service on **Monroe Street** to Washington to ease congestion on Monroe and provide extra space for loading and parking on Monroe.

Estimated cost: \$32.5 million, with completion in late 2015.

Union Station Transit Center

The off-street bus transit center at Union Station will be constructed on the site of the existing surface parking lot south of **Jackson Boulevard** between Canal and Clinton. The covered bus terminal is intended to complement the bus rapid transit service and provide direct links to **Amtrak** and **Metra** trains via stairs and an elevator connecting to the Union Station pedway system. The city's goal is also to reduce demand for private shuttle buses serving office towers, improve traffic flow on Clinton and Canal and offer curbside access to Union Station, officials said.

Currently, 15 CTA bus routes serve Union Station. The CTA estimates that 5,000 daily rides will be taken from the new bus facility, which will have three bays to accommodate up to nine buses at a time.

Improvements for access to Union Station will incorporate a top-to-bottom redesign of Canal Street between **Adams Street** and Jackson, officials said.

The existing CTA bus lane on the west side of Canal, a barrier-protected route that goes against the flow of northbound traffic, will be eliminated by moving buses to the new transit center on Jackson. Two travel lanes on the west side of Canal will become two northbound general traffic lanes.

A taxi stand and waiting area will be established in the protected median area along Canal between Jackson and Adams, with crosswalks connecting it to the sidewalk. A dedicated stopping area for intercity buses contracted by **Amtrak**, as well as space for private shuttle buses, will operate from the east side of Canal.

The staging area for **Megabus** service will be relocated to near the **Blue Line** subway entrance on Clinton, according to CDOT.

The northbound bike lane on Canal will be removed and the southbound bike lane on Clinton will be converted into two protected lanes serving both northbound and southbound directions, CDOT said.

Estimated cost: \$43 million, with completion in late 2015.

Washington/Wabash CTA station

The new CTA Loop elevated station will be located between Madison and Washington and serve the **Brown, Green, Orange, Pink** and **Purple/Evanston Express** lines. The existing **Randolph/Wabash** and **Madison/Wabash** stations, which date to 1898, will be closed.

Washington/Wabash, embodying a bold white steel and glass design that, based on an artist's rendering, looks somewhat like the skeletal system of a whale, is intended to become the gateway station to downtown and **Millennium Park**.

It will become the sixth-busiest station in the CTA system, with a projected 14,000 riders boarding each weekday, officials said. It will also become the first wheelchair-accessible station on Wabash, with escalators and elevators on both sides of the street.

CTA officials predict commute times will be faster and more reliable. The transit agency in recent years has rebuilt the Loop "L" tracks and attempted to add trains to the nearly 2-mile circuit in order to boost rider capacity, but trains still often crawl. The net elimination of one station — there will be eight stations instead of the current nine — will allow for fewer time-consuming stops by trains, officials said.

Estimated cost: \$75 million, with completion in late 2016.