



Build a transit network for the future

By Editorial Board | August 23, 2015

Chicago's plan for a 16-mile bus rapid transit line on Ashland Avenue looks to be dead for now, for good reason, but the ambitious vision for the city's transportation future that spawned that idea must be pursued. Chicago will thrive, even as many other Midwestern cities fade, only by remaining in a constant state of transformation.

The Chicago area requires \$19.5 billion just to fix up its existing transportation system and it will need another \$16.6 billion over the next 10 years. This comes at a time when government at every level is trying to spend less money — mostly because the money just ain't there.

But for all that, simply maintaining the metro area's existing public transportation system won't be enough. Urban-focused younger people, in particular, increasingly prefer riding rapid transit to driving a car. And excellent transportation is essential to a local economy that is at least as diverse as any in the city's past — tech jobs layered upon service jobs layered upon office jobs layered upon factory jobs.

It wasn't easy for past generations to build the L tracks and subways, commuter lines that reach throughout the area, as well as one of the world's busiest airports. Chicago even once had the world's largest cable-car system. We need the same spirit of innovation and energy today.

The Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning expects the six-county population to grow by 28.6 percent by 2040. Almost half that population growth will be in Cook County. There's simply no room to build enough new roads to move all those people to jobs, stores and everywhere else. We need a bigger and better transit system.

Mayor Rahm Emanuel took a helpful step last month when he introduced a transit-oriented development ordinance that will allow increased density around rapid transit and rail stations, bringing new riders onto the system. And work is proceeding on the Loop Link, a CTA bus rapid transit project connecting Union Station and Ogilvie Transportation Center to the eastern Loop.

But looking around the region, we see huge transit gaps. They keep people who need jobs badly far from employers who are looking to hire. Commercial centers, industrial parks and large employers sit on land not served by transit.

These three projects, in particular, should be at the top of the list.

- Extending the Red Line: Adding 5.3 miles of rapid transit line south to 130th Street would connect residents of the Far South Side to jobs in the Loop and North Side. It would shave about 40 minutes off a round trip compared with trying to make the trip now via bus and rapid transit.
- Extending the Blue Line west to the Yorktown Center mall in Lombard. The area west of the Blue Line's current end of the line in Forest Park is rich with commercial activity and jobs in the Illinois Technology Research Corridor.
- Building a high-speed rail line between the Loop and O'Hare Airport, something new Aviation Commissioner Ginger Evans is urging. It's no snap to reconfigure existing right of way for high-speed trains. But other cities with high-speed links between their airports and central business districts can sneer at Chicago's poky Blue Line service to O'Hare and an increasingly congested Kennedy Expy. If they can do it, so can we.