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Opinion: Chicago ain't ready for transit reform — yet

By Ed Zotti

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A recent [Crain's editorial](#) argued that the [transit reform flameout](#) in the Illinois General Assembly was “probably for the best.” Better to have a well-thought -out solution than the usual patchwork slapped together at the last minute.

No argument here. But I can't agree the plan to transform the Regional Transportation Authority into the Northern Illinois Transit Authority, which won Senate approval but went nowhere in the House, was a “decent initial blueprint” for transit governance.

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Sure, there's much to like in the proposed legislation. But several provisions, two of which didn't become public until the last day of the session, undermine the good parts. If no changes to the transit governance language are made when the Legislature reconvenes in the fall — and some say the prospects are dim — transit reform will amount to little more than a name change.

That would be disastrous. We face some of the most consequential public works decisions we'll make in our lifetimes. We can't afford to mess this up. Here's what's problematic:

- The supermajority requirement that hobbled the RTA — the votes of 12 of the 16 board directors are needed for major changes, effectively giving veto power to the blocs representing Chicago, Cook County, and the collar counties — has been reintroduced in a different form.
- The bill updates — but retains — a provision of the existing RTA statute that requires supermajority approval by the NITA board to implement interagency transfers, which the Chicago Transit Authority has opposed in the past. Lacking such transfers, riders who want to change between, say, CTA and Metra must pay a second full fare — one reason for the vanishingly low ridership at many of the 77 Metra stops within the city limits.
- Worst of all, the bill now includes a carve-out to let the CTA issue bonds to build the Red Line Extension (RLE) without approval by NITA. The bonds will saddle NITA with billions in debt before it even has its first meeting. [Investigation by transit advocate Nik Hunder](#) and [subsequent reporting](#) and [commentary by Crain's](#) suggest the RLE has been mismanaged — its cost shot up from \$3.6 billion last August to \$5.75 billion in January with no serious scrutiny and may be the highest per mile in the world for a project of its kind. CTA's explanation for the run-up — construction cost inflation — doesn't hold water. The matter screams boondoggle,

yet we're about to make it impossible for NITA to do anything about it.

Taken together, these provisions seem certain to perpetuate the long-standing problem with Chicago transit: The agency supposedly in charge is powerless to enact meaningful change. That leaves the operating agencies free to pursue their own agendas, to the detriment of riders and the region.

That weakness is especially unfortunate now — and not just because of the fiscal cliff. For all the disruption caused by the pandemic, the ridership crisis has forced an overdue rethinking of the transit mission. The result is a promising new vision for Chicago transit called integrated regional rail. The replacement of a weak transit oversight agency with a strong one is the perfect opportunity to start making the concept a reality, but only if NITA has the clout to make its plans stick. The way things look now, it won't.

That would be a shame. Integrated regional rail would be a game-changer for metropolitan Chicago. [Metra has been a big proponent](#), and both the House and Senate transit bills call it out as a goal worth pursuing. Here's what it could look like:

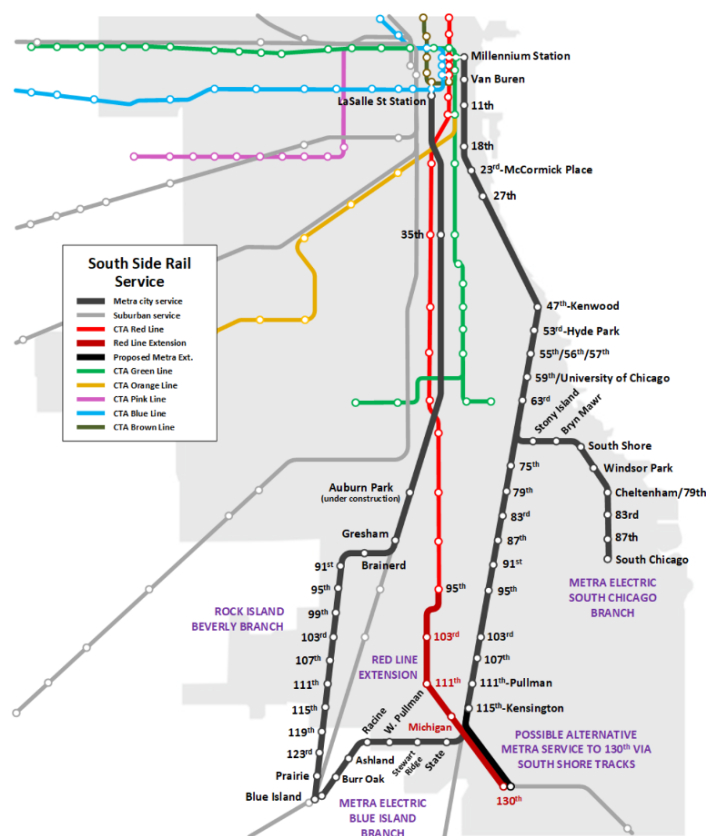
- Instead of terminating in the Loop, some inbound Metra trains would be through-routed to outlying destinations, similar to how the CTA Red, Blue and Green lines work now.
- Off-peak Metra trains, which currently are sparsely scheduled, would be operated much more frequently — again, similar to the el.
- All rail services, including Metra, CTA rail, South Shore, and Amtrak, would be physically connected to the extent practical and functionally integrated. The el can't run on the same tracks as mainline rail, and South Shore and Amtrak services would remain administratively separate. But riders could easily transfer from one line to another regardless of which agency operated what.

### **A cheaper alternative**

Integrated regional rail would improve service, save money, spur investment and permit optimal use of wasted transit assets. It would transform the metropolitan landscape, strengthening and expanding the walkable communities that are one of the region's greatest assets. Most pertinent for the present discussion, it would materially improve transit equity and

boost the South Side while rendering duplicative projects like the RLE unnecessary.

The catch is that integrated regional rail requires integrated transit governance. Many of Chicago's peer cities in the U.S. and around the world have had it for years. We never have, and the inevitable result is that Chicago transit agencies compete with each other and dream up projects like the RLE. The diagram below illustrates why that's bad.



This shows current rail services on the South Side. It may look unfamiliar at first because, unlike most Chicago transit maps, it shows Metra and CTA rail routes together, not just one or the other.

The diagram indicates that, far from being the transit desert some may imagine, the South Side has an abundance of rail service. The red and green lines need no explanation. The dark gray lines depict what might be called Metra city services — lines operated by Metra that are entirely or mostly within the Chicago city limits. Metra has three such routes: the South Chicago and Blue Island branches on the Metra Electric, and the Beverly branch on its Rock Island service.

The problem, of course, is that, lacking a strong

oversight board to make the operating agencies cooperate, Metra's city services have never been integrated with CTA from a fare standpoint, meaning fare parity and transfer privileges. So few city dwellers use them.

That's a waste of transit assets worth billions of dollars, and for no good reason. Metra city services are well-suited to fare integration. All have close-spaced stations like the el and use tracks that are largely or completely separate from those used by Metra suburban trains. All use or will use electrified rolling stock capable of rapid transit-like acceleration and braking. ([Battery-powered trains on the Rock Island line](#) will be introduced starting in 2027.) The downtown Metra Electric and Rock Island terminals offer convenient transfer to CTA rail lines.

Anyone looking at the diagram — anyone not from Chicago at least — would have to ask: Why is the CTA spending \$5.75 billion on the RLE to duplicate existing service when fare integration would be so much cheaper? Already there are three rail stops on 103rd Street; the RLE will add a fourth. There are two stops on 111th; the RLE will add a third. The planned Michigan Avenue RLE stop is a 10-minute walk from the 115th Street Metra Electric stop.

OK, there's no stop at 130th. Having asked around, I've established that building a station on the South Shore tracks at the same location as the planned RLE terminal — see the thick red line on the diagram — would cost about \$372 million. That's a lot for one station (track work would be required at 115th), but it's way less than \$5.75 billion.

Assuming that's the only capital cost for fare integration, a comparison of the cost-effectiveness of the RLE vs. fare integration gives this result:

- **RLE:** Four stations, 5.6 route miles serving Chicago community areas with a population of 72,000. Cost per person served: \$79,861.
- **Fare integration:** Three services totaling 52 stations and 39.6 route miles serving community areas with a total population of 488,000. Cost per person served: \$762.
- **Cost benefit comparison:** 105:1.

Translation: For every dollar spent on the RLE, fare integration would provide equivalent benefit for 1 cent. If you want a fast, cheap and easy way to improve transit

for all of the South Side, not just south of 95th Street, fare integration is a no-brainer.

But CTA has refused to consider it. The agency had a chance to test-drive the concept in [2019](#), when Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle proposed the South Cook Fair Transit Pilot, envisioned as a fare integration demonstration. Riders boarding Metra Electric and Rock Island trains at city stops would pay a CTA-level fare and have CTA transfer privileges. The county would cover any CTA revenue loss.

Metra was game, but CTA balked. "I've spent some time talking with Dorval Carter about it, and it looks like it is essentially a transfer of CTA passengers to the Metra line," then-Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot [said at the time](#), referring to the then-CTA president. Delayed by the pandemic and lacking CTA participation, the pilot launched in 2021 with inconclusive results.

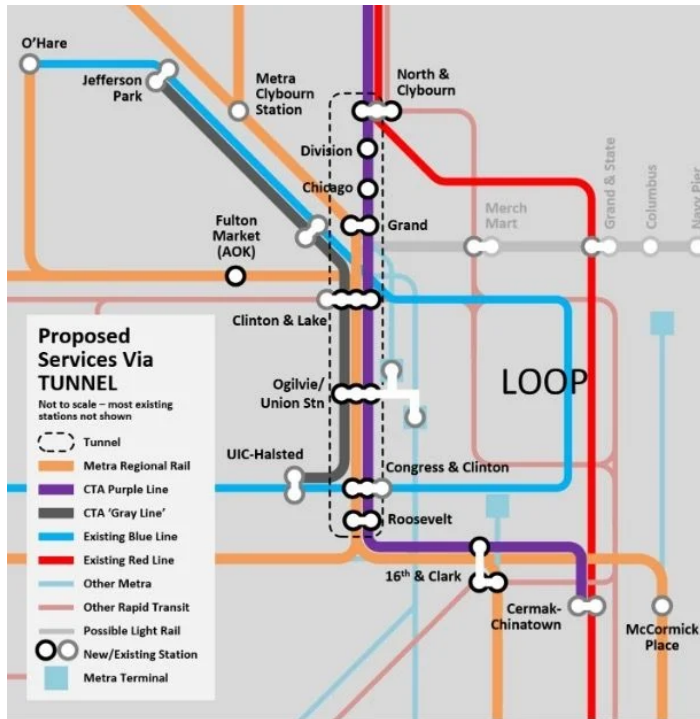
We can't continue with such foolishness. If a strong oversight agency had insisted on fare integration years ago, no one would ever have proposed the RLE. There wouldn't have been any need. South Siders would be using the excellent rail system they already have.

### **The Tunnel**

Fare integration is just the start of integrated regional rail. The next step would be physical integration. That would require a project called the Tunnel.

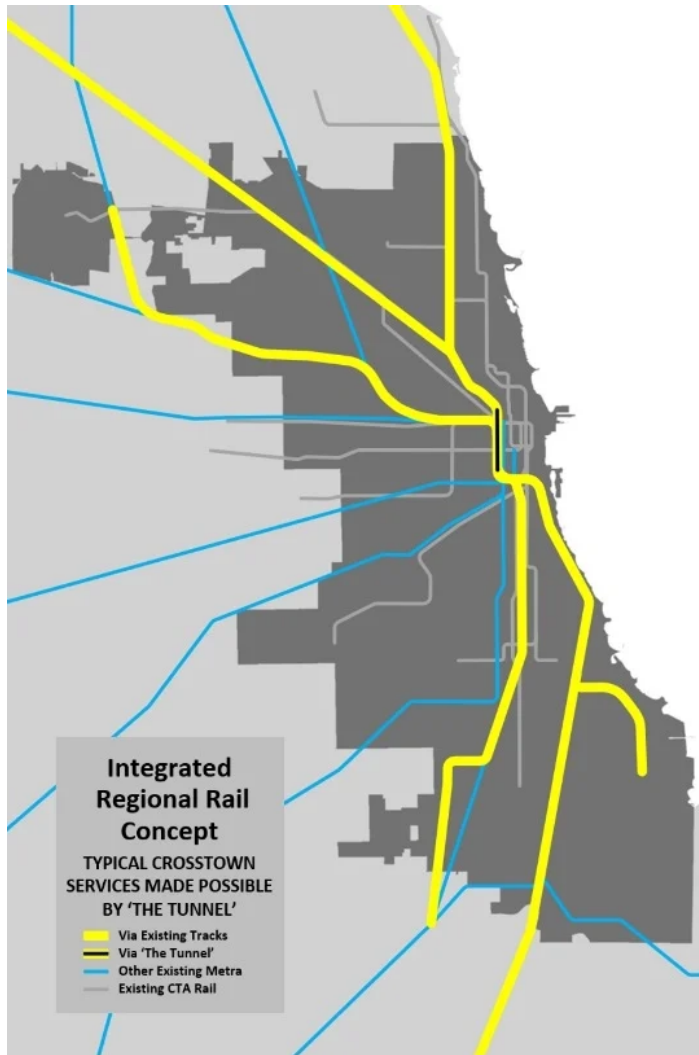
The challenge with regional rail is that Chicago's train lines consist of nine mini railroads with separate tracks, separate fare platforms, or both. Metra alone has five independent rail operations, each with its own tracks and downtown terminal. (Union Station consists of two terminals back to back.) That's why we need the Tunnel.

The Tunnel would be a short segment of subway in downtown Chicago that would tie the pieces of the rail system together. [A piece in A City That Works](#) on Substack explains the idea, and here's a [video take on it](#). The details haven't been fully worked out, but the graphic below shows one way it could be done.



Integrated regional rail as made possible by the Tunnel would do a lot of good for all of the Chicago area. For one thing, it would catalyze a vast expansion of the city's dense mixed-use core. But topping the list of beneficiaries would be the South Side and south suburbs, areas that have been isolated for too long. As the diagram below shows, services via the Tunnel would give South Siders easy access to jobs and opportunity throughout the metropolitan area on trains that are faster, quieter, and more comfortable than the el.





If you're serious about transit equity, this is how we get there. The question is whether we ever will. As things stand now, we won't.

The RLE is at the heart of the problem. Far from promoting transit equity, it will prevent transit equity from ever being achieved. It'll suck up so much money that we'll have trouble keeping the existing system in good repair, let alone launching new initiatives.

Money isn't the only issue. The RLE will block even low-cost improvements such as fare integration between CTA and Metra. If riders can freely transfer between the two systems, the rationale for the RLE evaporates. To protect its \$5.75 billion investment, CTA will fight any effort to let potential RLE riders use Metra instead — and NITA will have no choice but to acquiesce. If the RLE doesn't generate significant new ridership, which is quite possible, the Chicago region's credibility with federal funders will be hosed and we'll never get another nickel. We'll have to sacrifice an effective transit equity solution



to shore up an inferior one.

### **Majority rules**

The transit reform bill as currently drafted won't help matters. Take the supermajority provision. Major NITA decisions would require an "affirmative vote" from 15 of the 20 directors — in other words, a supermajority, same as with the RTA — or, alternatively, 12 of 20 directors, provided at least two affirmative votes are cast by each of the four NITA constituencies: the city of Chicago, Cook County, the five collar counties, and the state of Illinois. (The mayor of Chicago, the president of the Cook County Board, and the governor will each appoint five directors, and the five collar counties will appoint one director each.)

My fear — I'm not alone in thinking this — is that this amounts to a backdoor supermajority provision that will effectively give each of the four constituencies veto power and render NITA impotent.

Some don't see it that way. One argument I've heard is that NITA directors appointed by the governor will have sufficient personal gravitas and regional perspective to prevent the other directors from taking an overly parochial view.

I hope that's true, but history isn't encouraging — up through the Lightfoot administration, the Chicago appointees on the RTA board always voted as a bloc, presumably in accordance with the wishes of the mayor and CTA. I'm not confident the Chicago directors on NITA will show more independence.

The other concern is the interagency transfer provision. The current RTA statute, updated in the reform bill, says: "The Authority may at the request of two or more Service Boards perform other centralized services such as . . . transfers between services under the jurisdiction of the Service Boards . . . only upon an affirmative vote" under the supermajority provisions described above.

None of the knowledgeable parties I spoke to was sure what "transfers between services" meant. (Financial transfers? Property transfers?) However, on the reasonable assumption it means rider transfers, this language would enable CTA to block fare integration, the first step toward integrated regional rail.

### **How to fix it**

So we've got a choice. We can let transit reform go forward as currently drafted, watch CTA spend an absurd

amount of money on an unnecessary rail line, and stumble along until the next financial crisis. Or legislators can make a few revisions to the bill:

• **Eliminate the RLE carve-out and require NITA approval of CTA bond issues.** Few who've given the matter any serious thought would dispute that the RLE makes no economic sense; the question is what it would cost to unwind the project at this late hour. The answer is unknown and requires investigation. At the end of the day, the NITA board may conclude it has no choice but to let the RLE proceed. Nonetheless, this is our last chance to reconsider this momentous decision. To enact a law denying the agency the opportunity to do so would be a serious mistake.

• **Simplify the affirmative vote requirement to 12 of 20 votes provided at least two come from collar county directors — full stop.** The collar county directors are appointed by their respective county boards and are less likely to vote as a bloc, making them more susceptible to being steamrolled by the other constituencies. Requiring at least two of their votes for major measures prevents that. There's no need for any such provision for the other directors.

• **Delete the requirement for supermajority approval of interagency transfers.** This basic fare policy decision should be left to NITA, not written into the statute. One may argue the legacy language is merely permissive — the operating agencies can volunteer to implement interagency transfers, but NITA has the power to mandate them. While that may be technically true, the provision as written would clearly give CTA veto power. Why take a chance? Strike out the entire paragraph.

These changes won't guarantee better transit. But at least we'll have a chance.

**Ed Zotti** is a journalist and urban transit planner in Chicago.

By Ed Zotti

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