

Question and Answers from February 11, 2025, Transit is the Answer Coalition Meeting

1. Which revenue options does RTA support? Would all this money need to come from the state?

The RTA is asking for the state to increase its investment in transit operations, however most of our operating revenue comes from the RTA sales tax that applies within the RTA 6-county region. There's potential to increase revenue by making changes to that RTA sales tax, such as increasing the rate or expanding the base, as has been proposed by CMAP and others. These changes require state legislation, but the revenue would be coming only from our region.

In terms of specific revenue options, the RTA is neutral as this is ultimately a decision for the legislature. To inform their decision, the RTA analyzed [11 revenue options in our *Transit is the Answer* strategic plan](#) and CMAP looked at many of the same options in their [Plan of Action for Regional Transit](#).

2. What about the other proposals? How does RTA plan compare to MMA Act? Or the labor bill released last week?

There is some overlap in all three proposals. All support a major increase in operations funding, and reforms that would improve service for riders.

The labor proposal is aligned with the RTA's in terms of pushing for reforms that would increase RTA's authority over fares and service and help hold operating agencies accountable to improve service. Both the RTA and labor proposals oppose full consolidation, which is called for in the MMA bill.

3. Why isn't RTA fully exercising the authority it already has? Is reform really necessary?

State law does not empower the RTA with clear authority and enforcement mechanisms in key areas like fares and service.

Current law is unclear and confusing in some cases. Transforming Transit seeks reforms that make clear that one agency - the RTA - is accountable to riders and legislators on key regional issues, leaving the Service Boards to focus on delivering frequent and reliable service.



Much of the RTA's existing authority is linked to a strategic plan that's developed every five years and a single annual budget vote. We are proposing that this authority be distributed throughout the year, so we can respond to issues proactively and require the operating agencies to improve quickly.

4. We see the RTA is involved in this meeting, where do the agencies [CTA, Metra, and Pace] stand with moving forward with more service and better integration?

This is RTA's vision built on months of discussion with the Service Boards, riders, legislators, and others, and our years of experience overseeing the transit system. One of our goals is to free the Service Boards up to focus on delivering exceptional service.

We have regular conversations with the Service Boards at the staff and executive levels. There are aspects where the three operators may have a differing opinion or perspective on, but there is broad recognition that reform in these key areas needs to happen, and the RTA is best positioned to advance some of these reforms.

5. How will RTA work with IDOT district offices to ensure investments in transit don't fall flat due to inhospitable roadway designs?

One of the areas the vision addresses is how can RTA be better integrated into regional planning conversations around major roadways with high levels of transit service. We need to get RTA more engaged on the front end with state and local roadway agencies and have the Act clearly define a role for RTA in these projects. Better bus priority and integration have been clear priorities in recent years, and we need to make sure transit has a seat at the table with IDOT and other agencies managing these roadways.

6. Can we put some of these numbers into context? i.e. I know CTA has been underfunded for decades, as a percentage what does \$1.5B look like?

The \$771M fiscal cliff represents about 20% of the region's operating budget. That's a significant number and, if we're not able to fill it, that translates to a need to cut 40% of service systemwide. The flip side – increasing the operating budget by \$1.5B annual – represents a 20% increase in the budget and a 40% increase in service systemwide.

7. Can we depend on more or less federal transportation support?

Right now, there is some uncertainty, but money is still flowing and there is still a federal process for funding transit agencies. We don't think it's reasonable to expect a significant increase in the amount of money coming to public transit nationally.

Learn more: [Understanding capital vs. operating funding and why it matters](#)

8. CTA and Pace are both doing their own separate bus rework concepts and red line extension is happening while Metra Electric is underutilized. What is the plan for bringing cohesion to network/service?

Transforming Transit advocates for the RTA to have a more defined role in regional transit planning and capital project prioritization. For projects that cross jurisdictional boundaries, the regional agency – a strengthened RTA - would be responsible for leading and coordinating.

9. What next steps and action do you need from us, the public?



The RTA is looking for the public to support sustainable transit funding and reform to improve service and accountability for riders. You can [subscribe to RTA's e-newsletter](#) to stay informed and learn about future advocacy opportunities, including a digital campaign that will launch later in the legislative session. You can also [sign up to be a transit champion](#) to get more involved in our legislative advocacy through activities like posting content on social media, speaking with a reporter, or joining a meeting with your legislators.

10. I get that there is a large funding gap coming, and this sounds like a reasonable idea- but what are the alternatives? What are we comparing again? I assume it isn't just merge or bust.

The system is facing a \$771M projected budget gap starting in 2026 due to historic underfunding of transit operations in Illinois and the growth of remote work post-pandemic. This gap is too large to be closed with fare hikes or service cuts, which would only push riders away and harm the most vulnerable riders. RTA and many partners are advocating for legislators to [not just close the gap but enable \\$1.5B in new annual funding](#) so we can provide more frequent service for everyone. This funding should come with reforms that establish a stronger RTA with the authority to improve coordination, efficiency, and accountability across the system.

11. \$50 million in reform, what % of the agencies combined budgets does that represent? At first glance it sounds like a small amount for such a large combined system

While seeking new funds, the RTA is working with CTA, Metra, and Pace to increase efficiencies and achieve cost savings within current budgets. The operating agencies already outperform their peers on key efficiency metrics like cost per mile because of chronic underfunding. The state's contribution is among the lowest in the nation compared to peer states with similar transit networks.

In this tight funding environment, a stronger RTA would play a key role in saving costs through consolidating similar functions. The RTA estimates and is currently working to detail overhead efficiencies of \$50 million a year. Additionally, a fare increase of 10% would generate \$50 million, bringing the agency and rider contribution to partly addressing the cliff to \$100 million, or 13% of the projected fiscal cliff.

12. The Regional Day Pass has been a long time coming. What remains to be done to get it online and available?

The RTA has [signed intergovernmental agreements with all 3 operating agencies](#) to launch the Regional Day Pass. The current fare system vendor is now testing the technology behind the new fare product, with plans to introduce it later this spring.

13. Will all planning, administrative, and bureaucratic services be consolidated into the RTA, leaving the other agencies for day-to-day operations?

Rather than distributing key responsibilities across organizations as is done today, the RTA's proposed reforms would result in one agency — the RTA — being accountable to riders and legislators on the most important systemwide issues: fares, service quality, and capital investment. State law currently does not empower the RTA to engage proactively in these interrelated areas and doesn't grant the agency the authority to institute changes and improvements throughout the year. With a strengthened RTA responsible for regularly monitoring key systemwide issues, the region's transit operators can focus exclusively on day-to-day operations, subject to vital input and oversight by local leaders who know their communities best.



14. Will the current RTA board be expanded or restructured to tackle the implementation of the vision?

While we are not opposed to changes to the governing boards, our vision does not recommend or suggest changing the makeup of either the operators or the RTA's governing boards. That is up to the legislature and the appointing authorities from the RTA region.

15. What does the RTA hope to do with unifying fares?

Our goal is to deliver integrated fares and customer service so paying for transit is seamless and affordable across the network. A strengthened RTA would serve as the rider hub for fares and customer service, launching a single, unified regional app and rider hub to ensure access to simple, easy-to-understand fares and discount programs for all riders.

16. This is all operational type funding how will RTA handle the capital needs going forward to ensure the better interagency coordination. For faster service.

The fiscal cliff is an operations issue, but the system also has significant capital needs that affect our ability to deliver fast and reliable service. Major investment capital investment is happening right now because of the state's Rebuild Illinois capital plan and the federal Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, but we will continue to advocate for needed capital funds to replace and upgrade existing infrastructure. To fully leverage a transformational investment in transit service, a strengthened RTA would evaluate all major capital projects on key metrics including impact on accessibility, job access, equity, and climate as part of project selection and inclusion in the five-year capital program.

17. Prioritizing transit over cars seems like a no brainer for a city, many cities across the world are full on removing cars from city cores. Is Chicagoland looking seriously at options around this?

The RTA is encouraging the state to consider revenue options that incentivize transit use and reduce emissions, like various forms of congestion pricing including tolling and parking prices. We are also advocating for state and local departments of transportation to create more transit priority infrastructure like dedicated lanes to improve bus speed and reliability.

18. Under an empowered RTA, how would rider feedback be handled? From cleanliness to service changes/ optimization. Most interested in the response to data analysis/insights brought by advocates

See answer 13.

19. How does this plan create a comprehensive network? The boards don't play well together. Several areas in the city have Metra as the closest and fastest option, but CTA is cheaper. Where is the equity?

A strengthened RTA would set minimum performance standards for efficient, reliable, and safe transit services in different parts of the region. These standards would include required levels of coverage, hours, and frequency by mode and geography. Funding would be allocated in part by operators' ability to deliver service that meets standards. RTA could use the available discretionary funds to pay for new routes or services that fill gaps in network



20. Why not consolidate Pace and the CTA Bus system to help riders. The urban fabric doesn't end at Chicago's city limits.

The RTA opposes full consolidation because we think it would take time and resources away from a focus on the need to improve service for riders. If the system is provided sustainable funding, a stronger RTA is the quickest and most efficient way to deliver more frequent service to riders and create a fully integrated transit network.

21. Because it's labor-intensive, transit costs grow more than inflation (and more than the growth rate of historic revenue sources). How can we ensure adequate long-term revenue growth?

The pandemic exposed that the region's transit system is overly reliant on fares and without enough funding to deliver the level of fast, frequent transit service riders deserve as the economy evolves. In 2025, RTA is advocating for new operations funding to be sustainable so that transit funding keeps up with inflation and is less vulnerable to broader economic trends like recessions. Revenue sources should be stable, durable, and expected to grow over time. A diversity of sources is key—no single revenue source can fully address the funding need on its own. The RTA sales tax and associated state match will remain critical sources, but over time they should be complemented with other revenue.

22. Is there any study or insight regarding whether there is a sufficient number of men and women trained to work as train and bus operators, mechanics, planners, etc. to effectively manage the network?

See answer 13.

23. Are Metra capital investments for future clean rolling stock part of this budget?

The Transforming Transit vision is built on the need for sustainable operating funding so the system can overcome the projected fiscal cliff and deliver more frequent service for all riders. Upgrades to Metra rolling stock and other capital investments are included in the region's [5-year capital program](#).

24. Please articulate the benefits that accrue to folks living / working outside the six-county region as a result of improved transit under the jurisdiction of RTA.

Transit systems across Illinois face funding challenges and RTA is an active member of the Illinois Public Transportation Association where we advocate for improved transit funding and policy statewide. The Transforming Transit vision is focused on what sustainable operation funding could mean for transit service for all residents and visitors in the RTA region.

25. The "wait times" graphic only looks good absent the fine print (that actual waits could be double what's shown--and that's assuming no delays). Why not propose truly robust frequency improvements?

The Transforming Transit vision proposes regional service standards that would result in wait times being reduced by as much as 50% across the system. In the transit industry wait time is equal to half the amount of time between transit vehicles arriving at a given stop, given riders arrive at the stop at different times.



26. What are some of the main drivers that landed the public transit system in the deficits and limitations in service today? How can the plan ensure we don't regress back to where we are now

Public transit operations in the Chicago region have been chronically underfunded—particularly at the state level. Today, state funding makes up only 17% of operating revenue in Chicago. In New York that share is 28%, in Boston it's 44%, and in Philadelphia it's 50%. This underfunding has led to multiple periods of funding changes and reform since the RTA was established by referendum in 1974.

In 2025 RTA and the Service Boards are advocating for new operations funding to be sustainable so that transit funding keeps up with inflation and is less vulnerable to broader economic trends like recessions. Revenue sources should be stable, durable, and expected to grow over time. A diversity of sources is key—no single revenue source can fully address the funding need on its own. The RTA sales tax and associated state match will remain critical sources, but over time they should be complemented with other revenue.

27. Will CTA be open to these changes or resist implementation? What power and authority will RTA have to correct deficiencies in the service boards and enforce necessary improvements?

Transforming Transit is RTA's vision built on months of discussion with the Service Boards, riders, legislators, and others, and our years of experience overseeing the transit system. One of our goals is to free the Service Boards up to focus on delivering exceptional service. We have regular conversations with the Service Boards at the staff and executive levels.

See more in answer 13.

28. How would the RTA enforce accountability if the operating agencies still maintain their Service Boards?

See answer 13.

29. Does the current RTA staff currently have the ability to comment on and amend specific line items in the budgets of the service providers if the vision plan is put into place?

Transforming Transit envisions the RTA having earlier and regular input and authority over the Service Boards' annual operating and capital budgets. Currently, the RTA Board holds one vote in December on the regional operating and capital budget. Staffs coordinate on budgeting and capital planning throughout the year, with interim updates to the RTA board, but there is no formal authority or enforcement mechanism that RTA can leverage beyond the December vote. Rejecting the budget at this stage would throw the system into chaos and very quickly affect service quality and rider experience.

Under a strengthened RTA, state statute would require each of the Service Boards to report to the RTA board quarterly on progress in implementing this year's operating and capital budgets, and developing budgets for the following year, with a focus on key regional issues such as fares, service quality, and capital project prioritization. The RTA board would have the ability approve or identify areas where change is needed before granting additional funds.



30. CTA only has one public hearing a year and is relatively less responsive to public input. How can RTA create more of a rider responsive CTA if legislation does not change CTA governance?

See answer 13.

