

RTA Strategic Plan 2023 Agenda for Advocacy and Action

Months of public input and working group engagement have informed the RTA's development of a new regional transit strategic plan set for adoption in early 2023. Through that work, several key priorities have risen to the top for immediate action by the RTA and the Service Boards (CTA, Metra, and Pace) as well as those that will require a coalition of partners to achieve the plan's vision of *"Safe, reliable, accessible public transportation that connects people to opportunity, advances equity, and combats climate change."* Three principles – Equity, Stewardship, and Committed to Change – guide the plan.

Advocacy

To realize the plan's vision, a shared advocacy effort will be required to

- A. **Secure increased funding for transit operations.** Current funding structures, which rely heavily on rider fares, will not be enough to keep transit running at current levels when COVID-19 relief dollars run out. The region needs diverse funding sources to ensure transit is viable for the next generation.
- B. **Develop a funding structure that is less reliant on rider fares, but instead focused on expanding access to opportunity.** Chicagoland's public transit system contributes to our region's economic, environmental, and social health in ways and at a scale nothing else can. Focusing on equity over ridership would free the transit agencies to explore programs that are best for riders even if they may not generate revenue, such as seamless transfers or free rides for residents experiencing low incomes.
- C. **Build a coalition around the value transit brings to the Chicago region.** The RTA will need partners from across the spectrum of businesses, riders, and more to join in a campaign to change the way our region thinks about and funds transit.
- D. **Support communities' efforts to improve the area around their transit stations and stops and pursue equitable transit-oriented development.** Encouraging transit-friendly policies and investment in walking and biking infrastructure for the more than 200 communities within the RTA region will help improve transportation for all.
- E. **Engage with communities in an inclusive and transparent way about how transit dollars are spent in the Chicago region.** The RTA is committed to cultivating relationships between riders and transit agencies with two-way engagement that empowers communities' role in transit decision making.
- F. **Secure increased funding for transit infrastructure.** The capital needs to maintain and improve our infrastructure are great. Sustainable funding is needed to address decades of disinvestment and respond to post-COVID rider needs. Moreover, highway and roadway agencies have historically received more money for transportation projects than transit agencies, but the economic, equity, and climate benefits of transit demand a change.
- G. **Partner with roadway agencies to build more transit-friendly streets and advance bus rapid transit.** Dedicated space on roads for Pace and CTA buses are critical to improve speed and reliability. It will take a coalition to build the political will within the highway and road agencies to implement transit-friendly streets and more bus rapid transit (BRT) in the Chicago region.



Action

The plan process has identified immediate actions for RTA and the Service Boards including

1. **Make the transit system safer and more secure for everyone.** All riders need to feel safe riding transit in the Chicago region. While the transit system is part of a larger regional ecosystem with other economic and societal trends at play, there are several steps the Service Boards can take to improve safety, work with community partners, and communicate about disruptions on the transit system.
2. **Use new funding as a catalyst to create a fully accessible transit system.** Most buses and trains on the region's transit system are already ADA accessible, but the stations and infrastructure around transit still may create barriers for some riders. The RTA and Service Boards will continue dedicating funding toward accessibility improvements and work with partners to create accessible connections to transit.
3. **Provide more accurate, real-time travel information for riders.** Riders of fixed route and paratransit should have clear, accurate information about when and where their bus or train will arrive, regardless of schedule disruptions. While there are challenges to providing seamless information across three systems, several modes and a large region, RTA and the Service Boards are hearing feedback about information challenges and working continuously to make improvements.
4. **Make paying for transit more seamless and more affordable.** Riding CTA, Metra, and Pace, and transferring across systems should be as easy as possible. A systemwide day pass or more discounted transfers could help remove barriers to travel. In addition, reducing fares for some could also help make transit more financially accessible. The RTA and the Service Boards offer reduced fare and rider free programs for seniors and riders with disabilities but can explore how to expand these programs to new populations including all people experiencing low incomes.
5. **Accelerate the transition to a near-zero emission regional transit system and prioritize communities burdened by poor air quality.** CTA and Pace have committed to transition their bus fleets from fossil fuels by 2040, and Metra is exploring clean technology as it becomes available, but there are steps the RTA and Service Boards can take in the short term to move those plans forward.
6. **Assess the regional capital program in a new way including considerations for racial equity and mobility justice.** For the last several years, the RTA and the Service Boards have been working together to articulate and advance a regional transit capital strategy. This moment is an opportunity to refresh the considerations that are made when projects are added to the 5-year regional capital program to address inequities, better integrate with other regional planning processes, respond to legislative mandates, and consider the input of stakeholders.
7. **Adapt bus and rail service to meet the changing needs of riders.** Transit has been and continues to be a lifeline to many riders, but COVID-19 has also changed when, where, how, and why many residents use transit. Stakeholders have told us that transit needs to be more flexible and adapt to what is needed at this moment to connect more people to opportunity. Activities underway to advance changes to the transit network include the Pace Bus Redesign, Paratransit pilot projects, Metra exploration of regional rail, and CTA's Action Plan.

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