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## Memorandum

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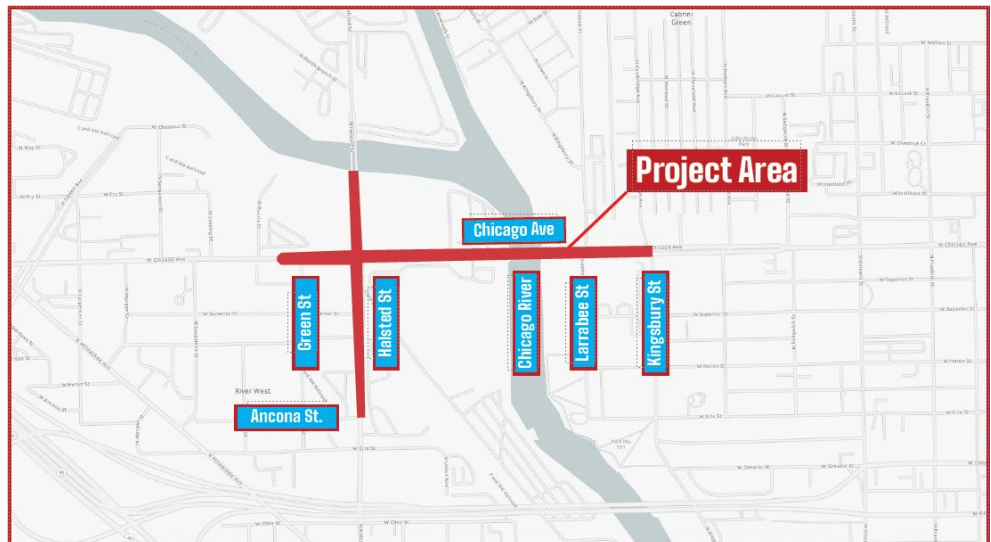
To: Board of Directors  
From: Leanne P.  
Redden, Executive  
Director  
Date: March 21, 2024

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# RTA Review of Chicago Avenue and Halsted Reconstruction Project

At their February board meeting, the RTA Board of Directors heard public comments from two local transit advocates – Austin Busch and Carsten Lohan – who expressed concern about the lack of priority given to bus transit in the planned reconstruction of the Chicago Avenue River Bridge and redesign of the nearby Chicago Avenue and Halsted Street intersection. The advocates argued the new bridge and redesigned corridor should include fully dedicated bus lanes in both directions – not just partial, one-way “queue jump lanes” as currently proposed by the project team. RTA board members thanked the advocates for bringing attention to the issue and directed staff investigate this further and propose possible intervention by the RTA.

## Project Background



The Chicago Department of Transportation (CDOT) is rebuilding the Chicago Avenue River Bridge and redesigning nearby corridors surrounding the future site

of the Bally's Casino at Chicago Avenue and Halsted Street in the River West neighborhood. The plan calls for widening the bridge from three to four lanes and turning Chicago Avenue's westbound lane into a right-turn and bus lane for a segment east of Halsted. On Halsted, plans call for adding bike lanes and establishing a northbound bus lane for a segment south of Chicago Avenue.

In response to community feedback and concern about the lack of priority given to people riding transit, walking, and biking in the design, CDOT has said they are reviewing and considering updates to the plan, including incorporating a fully dedicated westbound bus on Chicago Avenue east of Halsted, rather than a shared bus and right turn lane as originally proposed.

### **CTA Feedback**

Throughout the design process CTA has requested that bus priority lanes be included in both directions on Chicago Avenue and Halsted Street. The #66 Chicago and #8 Halsted routes are key routes for CTA, ranking as the top two heaviest ridership routes, based on weekday ridership as of October 2023. CTA contends that in order to make progress on city and regional goals to increase transit ridership and achieve greater equity, economic vitality, and sustainability, the city must take advantage of major projects like this to improve bus speed and reliability.

The most recent plans include only minimal bus priority treatments, with a short segment of a shared bus/right turn lane on westbound Chicago approaching Halsted and a short segment of bus lane on northbound Halsted south of Chicago that requires the bus to merge with general traffic before reaching the intersection with Chicago Ave. CTA has stressed that they do not concur with this design.

### **Role for the RTA**

RTA's strategic plan for the regional transit system Transit is the Answer calls for the agency to "work to advance Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) implementation across the region by funding and supporting corridor planning projects and by advocating for CDOT, the Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT), county departments of transportation and local government agencies to champion bus projects, improve their arterial roadway design, and secure more dedicated space on regional roads."

Transit agencies serving cities like Los Angeles, Seattle, Miami, Minneapolis, Houston, and Phoenix all have over 100 miles of transit-only or transit-priority roadway lanes. Chicago has less than 15 bus lane miles. East-west bus travel on major corridors like Chicago Avenue that connect neighborhoods is notoriously slow and unreliable because of the lack of dedicated bus infrastructure. Critical routes like the #66 Chicago and #8 Halsted connect the spokes in the city's hub-and-spoke rail network, playing a vital role in ensuring people in all neighborhoods have access to frequent and reliable transit service.

As noted by the advocates who testified at the board meeting, the RTA Act provides the agency some power and influence in discussions about dedicating lanes for transit use:

Sec. 2.06(a) states: *The RTA may for the benefit of a Service Board, by ordinance, provide for special lanes for exclusive or special use by public transportation vehicles with regard to any... streets... in the metropolitan region, notwithstanding any governmental statute, ordinance or regulation to the contrary.*

One of the reasons the RTA was created was to put structure around the transportation system in the region. This section of the RTA Act illustrates the voice that RTA can use to advocate for better treatment of transit as part of the transportation network.

This section of the Act may allow RTA to preempt home rule municipalities, helping to ensure a more cohesive transit system. This does not mean RTA could provide dedicated lanes without support and buy-in from the local, county, or state government that controls and maintains the street. But it may give the agency authority to play a larger role in the decision-making process about street design for major corridors like Chicago Avenue and Halsted that feature popular bus routes.

### **Next Steps**

RTA Chairman Kirk Dillard and Executive Director Leanne Redden sent the attached letter to CDOT Commissioner Tom Carney in support of CTA's request for fully dedicated bus lanes in both directions on Chicago Avenue and Halsted Street. The letter highlights the critical role both corridors plan in the transit network and how Chicago is trailing peer cities in dedicated bus lane miles. The letter points to RTA's authority to contribute to and influence decision making about street design for major transit corridors. The agency offered planning support to improve the current design and ensure the project delivers the multimodal benefits residents deserve.

Prepared by: Planning, Government Affairs & Legal  
MV/PK/KW/AC/AN  
Attachment



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March 13, 2024

Commissioner Tom Carney  
Chicago Department of Transportation  
2 N. LaSalle Street  
Suite 1110  
Chicago, IL 60602

**Re: Bus Improvements in Chicago/Halsted Corridor Project**

Dear Commissioner Carney:

Thank you for your support for public transportation and partnership with CTA, Metra, Pace, and RTA to build a faster and more reliable transit system for all Chicagoans who rely on it. As we work together to grow transit ridership and maximize the impact of the system on the region's economy, climate, and quality of life, it is critical to take advantage of opportunities to speed up bus service and make bus more competitive with car travel across the city.

The planned reconstruction of the Chicago Avenue River Bridge and redesign of the nearby Chicago Avenue and Halsted Street intersection is a critical opportunity to boost bus speed and reliability by incorporating fully dedicated bus lanes in both directions. The latest proposed design that contains minimal bus priority treatments is not sufficient to result in meaningful service improvements and does not align with our shared vision to improve travel times on high-ridership bus routes.

The #66 Chicago and #8 Halsted routes were the two highest ridership CTA bus routes in 2023, each averaging more than 15,000 trips per day. Ridership on these routes has grown more than 40 percent over the last two years, but survey data shows many bus riders continue to be frustrated by slow and unreliable services. Too often a crowded bus gets stuck in traffic alongside many single occupancy vehicles, delaying travel times and making it less likely people will choose to ride the bus.

This issue on Chicago and Halsted is likely to get worse in the coming years with the arrival of the Bally's Casino and related developments. Both routes appear on the list of proposed routes for bus priority treatments as part of the recently released [Better Streets for Buses](#) joint plan between CDOT and the CTA. Now is



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the time to upgrade transit service in the area to ensure all the new workers and visitors ride public transit rather than clogging neighborhood streets.

As the strategic plans of both of our agencies highlights, dedicated bus lanes are an efficient and effective way to improve speed and reliability. Buses often carry people more reliant upon transit and play a critical role in connecting neighborhoods in areas lacking access to the rail network.

RTA's strategic plan for the regional transit system *Transit is the Answer* calls for the agency to “work to advance Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) implementation across the region by funding and supporting corridor planning projects and by advocating for CDOT, the Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT), county departments of transportation and local government agencies to champion bus projects, improve their arterial roadway design, and secure more dedicated space on regional roads.”

As noted by two Chicago residents and advocates who testified at our February board meeting about the Chicago/Halsted project, the RTA Act provides the agency some power and influence in discussions about dedicating lanes for transit use:

*Sec. 2.06(a) states: The Authority [RTA] may for the benefit of a Service Board, by ordinance, provide for special lanes for exclusive or special use by public transportation vehicles with regard to any . . . streets . . . in the metropolitan region, notwithstanding any governmental statute, ordinance or regulation to the contrary.*

The RTA is eager to work with you, CTA, and the advocates to ensure the final design of the bridge and nearby corridors makes meaningful improvements to bus service and improves mobility throughout the area. The RTA is committed to advancing a network of bus priority streets across the region and this requires strong working relationships with roadway agencies like CDOT.

The Chicago region and particularly the City lags the nation in implementation of bus infrastructure. We urge you to incorporate best practice, multimodal bus and bike priority into this important project. Our staff remains ready to offer support.

We look forward to hearing from you as you address these concerns and continuing to work together to prioritize transit.



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Sincerely,

Kirk Dillard  
Board Chairman

Leanne Redden  
Executive Director