



SPECIAL REPORT
ADDENDUM TO THE
The South Side of Chicago
Connecting Communities Summit

Maria High School Students Make A Difference: Creating Accessible and Efficient Transit

Vocal young community leaders at Maria High School (MHS)* gathered on April 17th, 2002 to discuss how transportation can better serve their communities and promote a better quality of life. The 22 senior females, one senior male guest and two teachers were ready with many suggestions for transportation improvements to enhance their communities. While participants attended school in the Chicago Lawn community, most called other parts of the city home. This enabled Maria students to envision transportation scenarios that encompass large stretches of the city of Chicago.

The Maria High School community believes a diverse student body of 750 young women is, as their motto claims, “the right size, the right mix and the right choice.” At the mini-summit, ten African-American individuals and nine Hispanic youth, along with two Native American, two Caucasian, one Asian and one bi-racial community member joined to create input for the new Citizen Transportation Plan.

Transportation advocacy is nothing new to MHS. In October of 1997 bus service on West 67th Street was disrupted. The change forced students to find alternative routes to school. It required those working and seeking care at Holy Cross Hospital to adopt different routes as well. Transportation needs were not being met for the Maria community. Swift access to health care and education are not available for those who depend on public transit. Students, administrators, and community members petitioned, attended planning meetings and even made a video to bolster support for service adjustments and to reinstate bus service on West 67th Street. Despite their best efforts, no improvements have been made so far.

At the mini-summit, students placed a high level of importance on job accessibility, indicating it was their primary concern in regard to transportation planning.

Safety for transit users, pedestrians and drivers was also a major concern. The ability to use various modes of transportation is important, as is the option for children to travel independently. In their discussion, summit participants designated these issues as top priorities for creating transportation systems that foster community development and renewal.

Participants most often indicated on the survey that they get around by using a car with others. All attendees noted having at least one car per household. There are an equal number of cars to people in five of the 26 households surveyed. The next most used mode is transit. Meeting participants indicated using transit an average of 18 times per month. Riders logged a total of 444 transit trips in one month. Solo occupancy car use was the third most used mode, with walking coming in next and biking last. Fifteen mini-summit attendees walk to do their errands about two times per week. Top destinations include the Ford City Mall at west 76th Street and Cicero Avenue, Evergreen Mall at west 95th Street and Western Avenue, Lincoln Mall in Matteson, Midway and O’Hare airports, and Maria High School from home.

All participants indicated that they have access to transit service within one mile of their homes. Over half experience service more than twice an hour with seven respondents being served about once an hour and 8% with service less than once an hour. Ten households (40%) have children under the age of fourteen. Of these families, six (60%) see automobiles as their preferred mode for getting young children to school. The second most popular travel method is walking and young children least use bus service for school transit.

The ability to travel independently and safely is important to all transit users, but especially high school aged people. Participants are concerned with safety

* Maria High School is an all-girl Catholic secondary school located at 6727 South California Avenue. The school opened its doors in 1952 and since then has provided a foundation for its students, preparing them for college and beyond. The Holy Cross Hospital at 2701 West 68th Street is also part of their community. Sr. Margaret Zalot and Ms. Erin Lorenz were the gracious hosts of the mini-summit.

while using transit. Parents are more likely to allow their teenagers to use transit under safe travel conditions. Suggestions for increasing police presence in transit stations and on transit vehicles was unanimously supported among mini-summit participants. For one student, a typical trip to school involves taking two different trains and two different buses, one way. This must be done to avoid uncomfortable environments such as bus stops near jail centers. Promoting a police presence on transit could reduce overall travel time for riders trying to avoid uncomfortable or unsafe situations, especially during the night hours. Security should also be enhanced by the addition of safety call boxes or intercom systems that connect those in danger to trained professionals immediately. Specific areas for increased police presence are Fuller Park, Woodlawn, West Edison, Archer Heights and Riverdale.

Meeting participants desire walkable neighborhoods. Projects to promote pedestrian-friendly conditions in the entire region are needed. Adding a grade separation on Western Avenue from 31st Street to 35th Street is optimal for safer pedestrian passage. Parking should be removed from that section of the street, and features such as lights and clear signage/road markings would ensure a more comfortable walking experience for all. Pedestrian infrastructure on all of Cicero Avenue is necessary, highlighting the immediate need for improvement on the stretch from 22nd Street to 111th Street. Sidewalk and other pedestrian technology improvements are suggested region-wide.

Promoting accessibility to trains and busses was a focal discussion point for mini-summits participants. Students

indicated that station enhancements, extending current train lines and adding new shuttle bus service is essential for community renewal. Station enhancements at Pulaski, Central Park, California and Kedzie on the 54th/Cermak branch of the Blue line are suggested. Clean trains, buses and stations to encourage transit ridership are also needed. The Ashland/63rd branch of the Green line and the southern end of the Red line demand more attention to ensure clean and comfortable environments. Extending the Red line to 130th Street was strongly supported. Participants feel this would boost economic activity by promoting easy access to job and retail centers. A park and ride lot should be developed at the southernmost station to promote using the Red Line to access Chicago instead of vehicles. Extending the Orange line south on Cicero Avenue to 95th Street with stops at 67th, 79th, and 87th Streets would reduce congestion and allow swift access to the Ford City Mall, Midway Airport and offer connections to the rest of Chicago. Shuttle buses that are community based and sponsored, offering advertising for local businesses to create revenue, are highly encouraged by the participants at the mini-summit.

The Maria High School participants are eager to see their suggestions implemented. They are confident that asserting their views will promote community renewal, encourage economic development, decrease congestion and improve safety. High school students have unique transportation needs, often dependent on others or mass transit. MHS students are an excellent barometer for gauging the efficiency of a transportation system.

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The Citizen Transportation Plan is a project of the Chicagoland Transportation and Air Quality Commission, part of the Center for Neighborhood Technology, 2125 W. North Ave., Chicago, IL 60647, 773-278-4800, ext. 2030. Visit us on the web at www.cnt.org/2030.