



Connecting Communities

The South Side of Chicago

November 28, 2001

Historic Railroad Communities Rebound

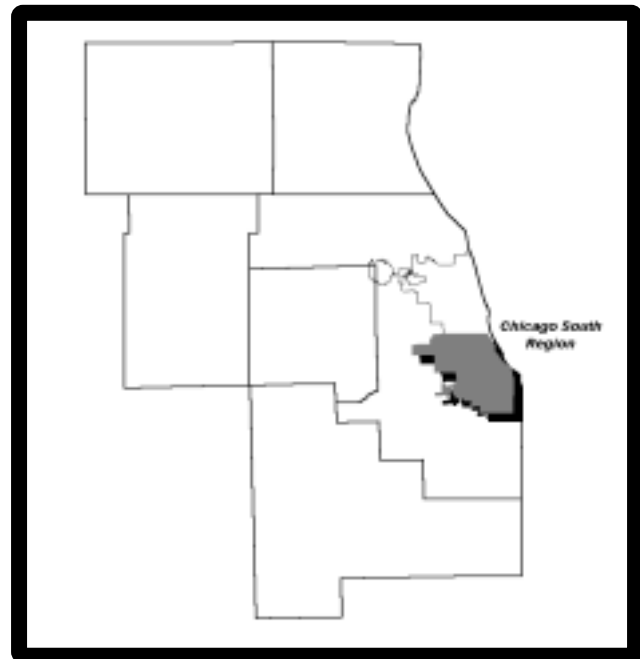
Our communities on Chicago's South Side offer a rich history marked by legendary blues hideouts, world-class museums and handsome boulevards. After the Chicago Fire in 1871, newcomers flocked to unincorporated neighborhoods south of the city, quickly buying prime real estate. The first to inhabit the area were Irish, Dutch and Scandinavian immigrants in search of jobs in the burgeoning industrial tracts. During the era known as the Great Migration (circa 1900 - 1960), African-Americans from the South arrived in Chicago in search of jobs and equality.

The industrial history of the region is as diverse as its people. Chicago was the greatest railroad city in the United States. The stock yards on the South Side created great demand for rail transport. Rail and local waterways facilitated the trade of goods such as lumber, grain, livestock and steel products. The southern area steel mills introduced thousands of jobs to the area and spurred expansion of existing rail and transportation services. Transportation stimulated the economy of the area as home seekers followed the rail lines and new communities were developed.

Around the turn of the century, the elevated train was slowly introduced to the South Side, first reaching to 39th Street, later stretching onto Englewood and Kenwood. The South Side experienced a population boom in the first half of the 20th century, with some areas nearly doubling in size. As time passed, racial tensions in some areas increased and the once bustling industrial centers closed their doors, putting many people out of work.

Today the region boasts economically and culturally diverse neighborhoods, including substantial African-American, Mexican and Arab communities. The ongoing demolition of many Chicago Housing Authority units creates challenges and opportunities.

Many former CHA residents have been forced to relocate in city and suburban communities that are less well served by public transportation than their prior homes.



Who We Are and How We Get Around

We came to the summit at Crerar Memorial Presbyterian Church, at 81st and Calumet, from neighborhoods all over the South Side, including Chatham, Hyde Park, South Shore, and Morgan Park. Our focus was on the area of Chicago south of Pershing Road (39th Street). We were about evenly distributed between male and female. More than 50% of total participants were African-American or bi-racial. Most of us were above 30 years of age.

Of the 36 of us who participated in the summit, 26 reported having cars. About half of us used transit in the last month, for a cumulative total of 680 transit trips (or an average of 40 trips per month per transit user). About half of us, but not necessarily the same half, walked to

accomplish some of our errands each week. Even with that many transit and walking trips, our most frequent mode of travel is still by car.

Eleven of our families have children under 14 at home; almost half of our families report that children walk to school some of the time. Of the trips to school that are made in vehicles, half are by bus and half by car.

Challenges and Solutions

Our greatest concern is access to jobs. Residents of our communities have the longest commute times in the entire region.* Our ability to travel to jobs outside our area, particularly to jobs in the suburbs, would be facilitated by more comprehensive and better connected transit service. In our region, the ratio of jobs to population is four persons for every one job compared to the North Side where there are three persons per job.**

Although many rail lines cross our communities, rail transit on the south side tends to be less accessible than in some other areas of the city. Metra's Rock Island and SouthWest Service lines offer no stops until travelers reach the farthest edges of the city. The CTA's Red, Green and Orange Lines have intervals between stops of one or one and a half miles. Consequently fewer of us report rail service near our homes than in other areas of the city.

In many parts of the city, transit stations are nodes for businesses and employers. This is less so in some of our neighborhoods, particularly on the Southwest side and the area around the old Pullman and US Steel plants. New developments, such as the Gateway Park area and the ATA Training Center on 7200 S. Kostner will bring large new workforces that need transit to the area. Other companies on the Southwest side still are in need of better transit for their workers, such as the Nabisco Company and Stylemaster, both located in the Chicago Lawn neighborhood. Investing in our communities through centering commercial development around transit hubs will increase our communities' vitality, and enable us to live, work, and travel more conveniently.

The transportation sector, including intermodal rail, provides a large number of good-paying jobs for our region and could prove more. We would like to see additional transportation jobs come to our communities. The precedent of transportation generating new jobs and housing on the South Side is one historic precedent we should repeat.

Transit is an essential service that needs investment and improvement. By a very wide margin we see an increase in public transportation as the most important way to improve transportation for our communities. We want transit that is safe, reliable and well connected. Equitable access is an important value for us. Seniors and the disabled need better access to CTA buses and trains. All Metra stations should be accessible by ADA standards as well. A universal fare card and better coordination between transit providers would increase ease of access for all of us.

Infrequent service on some of our bus routes is a major problem and some buses tend to bunch together, compounding the problem of long waits between buses. Express buses would increase our transit options. The comfort, cleanliness and maintenance of our bus fleet is not always kept at a high level. Amenities such as bus shelters would be welcome at many locations.



Metra service on the Rock Island and SouthWest Service lines bypass most of our communities. The Rock Island travels 90 blocks from downtown before stopping near the edge of the city and the SouthWest Service covers even more distance without stopping. The long distance between many CTA rail stations makes transit less convenient in some of our communities. We made recommendations for new stops on CTA and Metra lines and would also like to see a station in our community for the new High Speed Rail initiative.

* Based on analysis of 1990 data from the Chicago Area Transportation Study (CATS): average commute time for communities south of Pershing Road in Chicago is 38 minutes; the regional average is 31 minutes.

** Based on analysis of 1990 data from the Northeastern Illinois Planning Commission (NIPC).

We felt strongly that existing Red Line service should be extended to the city limits. Existing rail should be utilized at a higher level of productivity, by increasing the capacity of trains on all lines and by innovative uses of existing track, like the “Gray Line” proposal (which involves using the in-city Metra Electric Line as a CTA Line). We would restore the Green Line on Stony Island. More innovate shuttle services could also be provided.

The issue of safety was raised regularly. Safety is of special concern to the elderly, disabled and children. One inexpensive but effective safety policy would be to allow riders to get on or stay on a bus at the end of the line (i.e., they might ride a brief time in the wrong direction in order to have the security of being inside a bus.

Altgeld Gardens was cited as an example of a community that is relatively isolated and in need of transit access. This community is one of the poorest in the nation. It is imperative that its residents can access jobs in other parts of the metropolitan region. We believe that making transit improvements for the communities that are most economically deprived is essential to improving the economic strength of the whole region. Increased transit connectivity would also contribute significantly toward improving the overall quality of life for the residents of Altgeld Gardens.

We need coordinated planning in other areas too.

Accessible, safe and convenient transportation options are necessary to maximize our mobility without causing environmental damage. Walkable neighborhoods are highly desirable, but increasingly hard to find. Road rage is a constant threat to walkers. Snow and ice keep older or disabled people house-bound for weeks on end. Sidewalks are integral to the traditional communities that we want to preserve or recreate. Pedestrian traffic encourages local purchases and helps to keep money circulating within a community.

There are not enough safe bicycle routes and bicycle riders are not legally regarded as “intended” users of roads. We advocate policies that clearly promote walking and bike riding. A relatively small investment in sidewalks, bike routes and amenities like benches and bike racks would generate very large dividends. We would expand programs for linking bicycles with transit, including bike parking at transit stops, bike racks on buses and bike transport on trains, both CTA and Metra. We would go further and create covered bike trails for winter riding.

We need to better coordinate investments for automobiles too. Many of the streets in our communities are in very poor condition. There are many spots on the

South Side where freight rail lines intersect roads and cause massive traffic jams. Grade separations at 95th and Stony Island, at 127th and Western, and at 71st and South Shore would alleviate some of the worst traffic tie-ups. Existing roadways could be more efficiently used with better signalization and more left-turn lanes. While we want traffic to move more efficiently, we do not want it to move at speeds that are detrimental to either pedestrians, bicyclists or other traffic.

Parking lots near transit encourage ridership. We encourage the construction of parking lots near transit stations, but only where there is not likely to be significant transit oriented development. Transit nodes with the potential to be centers of community and economic activity would not be well served by large parking lots and should be conserved for job generating activity. Housing should not be torn down to construct parking lots or other transportation projects.

We were excited to reach consensus on so many issues in one meeting. The fact that we could make significant improvements at very little cost when we concentrated on pedestrian and bicycle travel was an important revelation. The common themes between communities and between different people created a unifying experience. It was exciting to offer citizen input on transportation issues; it was a new experience. While we know that actually constructing some of these projects requires specialized training, it was satisfying to find that average citizens often have expert insight into the problems and solutions facing their communities.

Our Vision for Our Communities

We are very energized by the opportunity to look at the region’s future and offer our vision for a brighter tomorrow. We are resolute in believing that the public should be involved in regional and local planning on a continuous basis, not just periodically. We envision a region where citizen input results in more walkable neighborhoods, well planned transit stations that create economic activity in our communities, and a local mix of housing, jobs and services near our transit stations. Our ideal region would fairly distribute the benefits and burdens of transportation among communities and would reuse and rebuild existing communities. As citizen planners we would assure that air and water quality are protected as we make our transportation investment decisions. We have a clear and very strong consensus that investment in public transit is fundamental to achieving this vision.

Recommendations

Create local jobs as well as access to jobs in other areas. Transit oriented development is one way to create businesses, services and jobs near our transit stations, provide local economic development, reduce the need to drive, and increase the city's tax base. This kind of redevelopment can and should happen without tearing down existing housing stock. The efficiency of traditional, dense communities, with easy access between jobs and housing should be preserved where it exists now and recreated where there is vacant land near transit stations. In other areas, existing freight rail lines can be an asset in redeveloping areas hard hit by the demise of the Pullman and US Steel companies with new transportation industries. Employers and transit agencies should work to find ways to make the reverse commute more affordable for minimum wage workers. Access to capital for minority business development should be encouraged. The manufacture of rapid transit passenger trains and buses should happen locally.

Build on existing transit assets. Existing bus service needs to be enhanced on both North-South and East-West routes, especially the 55th Street, King Drive, Cottage Grove and Avenue O buses. Express buses and more frequent service were suggested as improvements to increase transit use. More bus shelters, and seats in existing bus shelters, should be added to accommodate seniors and the disabled. The CTA needs to resolve equipment, maintenance, driver, and vehicle replacement issues more efficiently. Unlimited CTA and PACE transfers within a two hour time period should be considered, rather than the three-ride limit, since those with less access to transit should not be financially penalized. Shuttle bus service should be instituted at: 1) Midway Airport to Lake Shore Drive; 2) Garfield Blvd. Red/Green Line stops to Hyde Park; and 3) several sites radiating out from the 95th Street station.

The Red Line should be extended to the city limits; new stations should be built at 58th/59th Streets, 102nd Street and 111th Street. A new Green Line Station should be constructed at 63rd and Stony Island, with a mile of new track from the current terminus. New Metra stops should be built at locations that best connect service with the CTA. We should investigate the Gray Line proposal. Existing Metra stations need to be rehabilitated, including better lighting and security. CTA, Metra and Pace should work cooperatively toward a universal fare card and coordinate their services better. Improve signage at Metra stations and increase the number of places where CTA and Metra stations connect for transfers.

Planning traditional neighborhood development will increase our transportation options. Sidewalks and bicycle routes need to be improved or constructed in all of our communities, but especially near transit stops. We need to facilitate the use of transit in combination with walking or biking by providing bus shelters and other pedestrian amenities, installing bike racks at train stops and on buses, and allowing bicycles on Metra as well as on the CTA at off-peak times. There is a need for immediate improvements to bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure on East-West streets. The city should redirect some snow-removal capacity from the streets to the sidewalks, especially around transit and in commercial areas. Existing roads and traffic flow could be improved with better signals and more left turn lanes, being mindful of the need to integrate automobile traffic with pedestrian and bicycle travelers. Build parking lots near transit sites such as 63rd Street and the Dan Ryan, 95th Street and the Dan Ryan, 119th Street and Ashland Avenue, 138th Street and Avenue O, and multiple use parking options for shared space between commuters and grocery shoppers. Parking lot development should not conflict with economic development opportunities.

Provide more and better opportunities for the public to be involved in transportation planning. The city, the state, the county and the transit agencies should all increase the opportunities for public comment early in a planning cycle, rather than telling the public what will happen after plans are finalized. We clearly understand the impact of transportation on jobs and community development. When our communities are threatened or blessed by transportation plans, we should be the first to know and have the opportunity to shape or re-direct the plans to benefit local neighborhoods.

The South Side *Connecting Communities* summit participants came as individuals and as members of groups. The people who helped plan the summit came from the following groups:

Center for Urban Politics & Policy,
at Chicago State University
Crerar Memorial Presbyterian Church
Greater Southwest Development Corporation

Greater Washington Park Community Development Corp.
Southeast Chicago Development Commission
University of Chicago Environmental Center

Connecting Communities Regional Partners

Business and Professional People for the Public Interest
Chicago Design Consortium
Chicago Metropolis 2020
Chicago Rehab Network
Chicagoland Bicycle Federation
Citizen Action-Illinois
Council for Disability Rights
Environmental Law and Policy Center of the Midwest
Friends of the Chicago River

Independent Voters of Illinois-Independent Precinct Organization
Interreligious Sustainability Project
League of Women Voters of Illinois
Metro Seniors in Action
Metropolitan Planning Council
Mid America Institute on Poverty
Sierra Club
Sustain



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.