

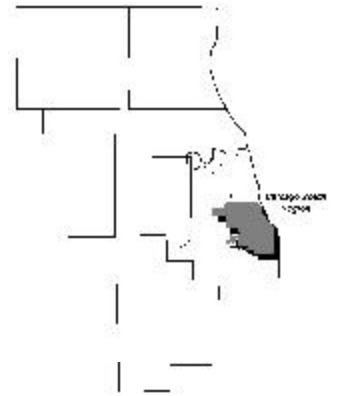


Connecting Communities

South Side of Chicago Caucus

November 5, 2003

A Chicagoland Transportation and Air Quality Commission project in partnership with:
Crerar Memorial Presbyterian Church



Community economic development and transportation policy continued to be closely linked for South Side residents who attended the *Connecting Communities* caucus. The South Side's history is directly linked to the history of transportation in North America (see excerpt from summit); caucus attendees were mindful that strong transportation links will be necessary to recapture the South Side's historic vitality.

New transportation investment - or lack of investment - will have an impact south of Pershing Road for decades. Caucus attendees expressed doubt about several proposed projects and about the lack of community input in selecting projects. The most highly desired major projects included the Gray Line¹ and CTA Red Line extension to 130th Street (with certain concerns about the alignment of the latter project). Participants were very skeptical of plans to close several South Side ramps as part of the Dan Ryan (I-90/94) reconstruction plan.

Create local jobs and access to jobs in other areas. Minor progress on transportation-linked development was reported over the last two years. Recent transportation investment however, has not significantly improved economic development. New commercial developments located at 86-87th and Cottage Grove and Indiana were signs of progress, but the extent to which transportation assets were coordinated with new development was viewed as minimal.

The proposed CREATE Plan² was viewed optimistically. The South Side more than other parts of the region could benefit from reduced rail congestion and increased jobs at terminals, intermodal yards and spin-off industries. One person re-emphasized the summit suggestion to leverage transportation industry jobs by establishing a new bus/train manufacturing plant in Pullman.

The Chicago Transit Authority (CTA) received praise and criticism for policies related to job access. New bus routes were roundly applauded, but the threat of a fare increase would make commuting less affordable, putting an unreasonable burden on minimum wage workers.

Build on existing transit assets.

Recent increases in the hours of service, route

Connecting Communities caucuses are a public involvement follow-up to the *Connecting Communities* summits that involved over 500 people from throughout northeastern Illinois. The caucuses are designed to take a "snapshot" of a community's views on progress toward their summit recommendations. Some recommendations were major projects that could only be accomplished over a long time period. Others were practical, short term, and inexpensive solutions to community mobility deficits.

Excerpt from the South Side of Chicago *Connecting Communities* Summit of November 28, 2001

"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."

extensions and express service were highly valued improvements on CTA buses, including 87th Street, King Drive, Cottage Grove, 79th Street, 95th Street and Garfield Boulevard. Extended service on Vincennes to serve Simeon Career Academy was also recommended.

More bus shelters, and bus shelters with seats, were recommended during the 2001 summit; shelters installed by the city were seen as a constructive step, but the liquor advertisements on the sides of the shelters were undesirable. Bike racks on buses were seen as another welcome improvement.

Decades of promises to extend the Red Line are beginning to wear thin. Caucus participants felt strongly that the extension should be a high priority project for the region and that particular attention should be paid to access for residents of Altgeld Garden, who have limited transit service. The proposed Gray Line, which would provide frequent CTA service on existing Metra Electric track, was

¹ See description, last paragraph of this page.

² A plan of the freight railroads and the city to invest \$1.5 billion to improve freight rail traffic in the city.

also seen as a highly desirable and cost-effective project with great benefits for the region.

The quality and condition of transit (Metra and CTA) facilities and vehicles were a source of constant concern for community members. Metra needs to move quickly on rehabilitation of decaying stations, particularly on the Electric District Line. The need for



Metra Station, 71st St. and S. Jeffery Blvd.
(Courtesy Gray Line Campaign)

better connections between Metra and CTA, including more east-west express buses between stations, was raised by several attendees. CTA needs a better policy for replacing buses that break down so that commuters are not stranded.

Planning traditional neighborhood development will increase our transportation options.

“Traditional neighborhood development” seemed to be synonymous with “walkable communities.” Caucus participants’ discussion focused on characteristics of pedestrian-friendly communities. Many mentioned lack of snow removal as an unresolved issue. Sidewalks in general, but especially at bus stops, should be passable in all weather.

In some areas, specific sidewalks were reported to be in very poor condition and in need of reconstruction (87th Street between Kedzie Ave. and Central Park Ave. and near Western Ave. and Rockwell St. were prominent examples). New pedestrian underpasses crossing Lake Shore Drive are welcome assets to the communities of the South Side.

Parking received mixed reviews. Transit use is impacted by the availability of parking or other access channels. In some communities where there isn’t adequate parking, cooperative businesses have agreed to allow commuter parking in lots that are not filled on weekdays. Several people mentioned shared parking as a way to meet demand for parking without losing land that could be used to create jobs.

An additional innovation was offered. Jitney service, a taxi that would offer a fixed price, standardized route and could shuttle between transit stations and other areas, was seen as a good way to create local jobs, improve access to transit and preserve land for better uses than parking lots. One participant stressed the importance of taking a chance on a new and innovative idea like jitney service. She suggested

that this innovative service be tested for at least three years to be given the opportunity to establish itself and generate revenue.

The question of conflicts among different modes came up in the discussion of traditional neighborhood development. Some participants felt that large railroad companies don’t respect local communities and block intersections unnecessarily or for too long. This goes beyond inconvenience; when emergency vehicles cannot move freely, people’s lives are endangered.

Provide more and better opportunities for the public to be involved in transportation planning.

Caucus participants had a very animated conversation about how public involvement efforts conducted by official transportation planning agencies could be improved. While some expressed appreciation for the opportunity to speak in CNT-sponsored forums like this caucus, there was skepticism about whether policy makers take citizen input seriously (one person asked that the caucuses be more explicit about “who is against our plans”).

There were suggestions for how public bodies could improve outreach as well as clarify the message and information provided. Some at the caucus felt the public should be informed not only through the traditional media (city-wide daily papers, T.V., neighborhood papers) but also through churches and block clubs. An executive summary of the plan should be sent to all the churches. Another suggestion was that transportation agencies should educate the media to make more timely announcements about plans and clarify how comments might be offered.

One group felt very strongly that CATS³ should publish a final list of projects chosen for the 2030 transportation plan. They also said that the projects needed to be ranked so the public can judge the level of benefit between different projects. Another group felt that CATS should be reorganized, with more elected officials making decisions.

The CTA⁴ was criticized for not working closely enough with local community-based groups and public interest groups. One example offered was that while the new south side bus routes were good, they could have been better had the CTA asked for early public input.

A final note of urgency was sounded about the proposed closing of exit ramps on the Dan Ryan Expressway. Community members see this proposal as in opposition to the public will, harmful to South Side economic development, and unfair to the communities that will bear the fumes and noise but will lose access. This community’s eagerly awaited transit extension has been stalled for too long. The plan to close Dan Ryan Expressway access seems to move too fast. *Regional planners seem to miss the irony that the expressway is congested because transit in the same corridor has been delayed for so long.*

³ The Chicago Area Transportation Study, the region’s official transportation planning agency.

⁴ Chicago Transit Authority, which authorized a fare hike between the time of the caucus and the approval of this report. One of the new CTA mandates arising from the fare hike negotiations was a monthly (rather than annual) public comment period at board meetings.