



Andrew Adams

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It was standing room only in a downtown Chicago committee as activists, transit experts and lobbyists hung on the word of transit agency chiefs.

Public transit has become an increasingly contentious issue for the Metropolitan Transportation Authority – the funding body which oversees bus routes, Metra and the Chicago Transit Authority – has a fiscal cliff in 2026.

While the agencies currently are buoyed by pandemic-era temporary allowances in state law, they will face a cumulative gap of \$730 million in operating costs beginning in 2026, according to the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning.

“The preliminary analysis from our consultant shows that the worst-case scenario, without state funding assistance, could wipe out transit service in northwest Illinois,” RTA Board Chair Kirk Dillard, a senator from Hinsdale, said Tuesday.

Under that worst-case projection, the fiscal cliff would cause a 1.5% drop in regional GDP in the first year and impact up to 25,000 jobs.

But Dillard painted a much rosier picture if the state increases support for the transit agencies: \$2.5 billion annual growth and the addition of 27,000 new jobs.



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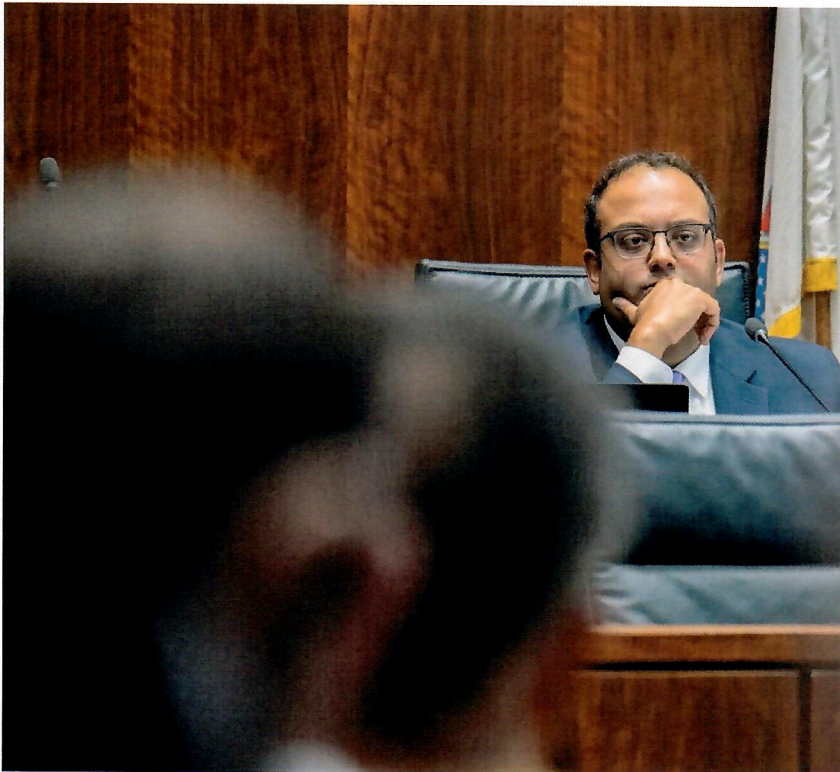


New Arlington Heights antique shop offers curiosities, oddities and plenty of kitsch

“You’ve got a choice to make,” he told lawmakers Tuesday.

Sen. Ram Villivalam, the chair of the Senate Transportation Committee, presided over Tuesday’s hearing the first in what will be a series to invest improvements to public transit in Illinois.

The Chicago Democrat said there will be “no votes for fund-raising at the General Assembly and transit board first address service is: reforms.



Illinois Sen. Ram Villivalam, a Democrat from Chicago, presides over a Tuesday hearing featuring the heads of the Chicago Transit Authority, Pace, and the Metropolitan Transportation Authority. *Capitol News Illinois photo by Andrew Adams*

Earlier this year, Villivalam proposed legislation that would merge transit agencies into one organization to be called Metro Chicago Authority.

But the heads of the agencies balked at the idea of major re-

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“We all want to do the best job we can,” Pace Executive Director Metzger told the committee. “I do not believe that combining organizations will make us better.”

Metzger said each agency has a board that includes local representatives. “The needs of suburban areas will not be met as well as they are when governed by a single agency.”

CTA President Dorval Carter also defended the current system. “The model that’s been set up for governance today didn’t change,” Carter said. “It was a really negotiated compromise between accountability and the need for local control.”

Metra CEO James Derwinski noted that many of the improvements advocates seek are a matter of funding, not oversight.

“If we adequately fund the system, the operators can do the job,” Derwinski said.

Representatives of business groups spoke to lawmakers about transit’s economic impact, but also the need for reform.

Jack Lavin, head of the Chicagoland Chamber of Commerce, echoed Villivalam’s call to improve service and governance before providing new revenues. He called sales tax increases and congestion taxes “job and growth killers.”

Sen. Don DeWitte, the committee’s GOP spokesman and former RTA board member, said he agreed with Lavin’s comments about taxes.

“I think we need to be very careful about putting additional burdens on taxpayers or riders within the RTA system,” the Republican from St. Charles said.

DeWitte said he hopes to further explore the idea of increasing state or federal funding, noting that Illinois provides 17% of RTA’s revenues, while other states contribute significantly more to large transit systems. Philadelphia’s transit

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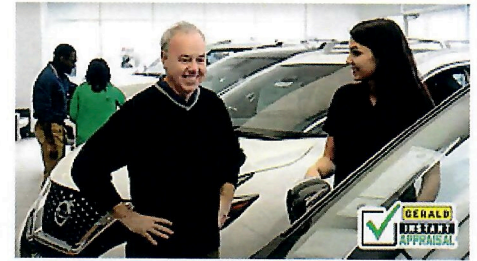
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system gets half of its funding from the state of Pennsylvania, according to a CMAP analysis cited by DeWitte.

“That’s an area that I think we are woefully shy on,” DeWitte said.

Micheál Podgers, a policy lead with the transit advocacy organization Better Streets Chicago, said he isn’t surprised by the transit agency’s lack of enthusiasm for reform.

“I will say, though, I was heartened to hear that, overall, it seems they’re in favor of increasing investment in transit, even though certainly some of the more conservative speakers and conservative members of the Senate were a little bit tentative on increasing taxes,” Podgers said.

Tuesday’s hearing will be followed up with five additional hearings around in the coming weeks. The hearings, according to Villivalam, will inform some kind of proposal by lawmakers’ spring session next year.

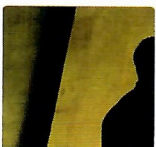
“We definitely need to take action, I think, at least 9 to 12 months before the fiscal cliff of early 2026,” he said.

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