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Illinois lawmakers to propose merging Chicago area's transit agencies, amid CTA complaints and looming budget woes

The proposal is part of a broader look at the future of transit, as the region's agencies brace for federal COVID-19 relief funding to start running out in the coming years



A CTA train crosses the Chicago River over the Wells Street Bridge on April 6, 2024. (E. Jason Wambsgans/Chicago Tribune)



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The Chicago area's public bus and rail systems would be combined under a measure Illinois lawmakers are expected to introduce, which would eliminate the CTA, Metra and Pace as separate agencies.

The legislation comes as complaints have mounted over the Chicago Transit Authority's struggles to provide frequent, reliable and safe service, and days after Gov. J.B. Pritzker called for "[an evolution of the leadership](#)" at the CTA. But it is linked to an earlier report laying out [recommendations about what Chicago-area transit could look like in the future](#), and marks a decision to pursue the more comprehensive of two options outlined in the report to overhaul oversight of public transportation.

The proposal is part of a broader look at transit funding, as the region's public transit agencies face a combined \$730 million budget hole once federal COVID-19 relief funding starts running out, which could be as soon as 2025. Transit agencies have warned failure to plug the financial hole could lead to catastrophic service cuts and fare increases, and the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning was tasked by the Illinois General Assembly with developing recommendations to overhaul transit, which were delivered to lawmakers in December.

The decision to introduce legislation is a signal of how some lawmakers and civic organizations want to proceed. Already, the transit agencies have sought more state funding, while the civic organizations and lawmakers say funding must be linked to changes to the way transit is overseen. But debate about consolidating the transit agencies and funding could prove thorny in Springfield.

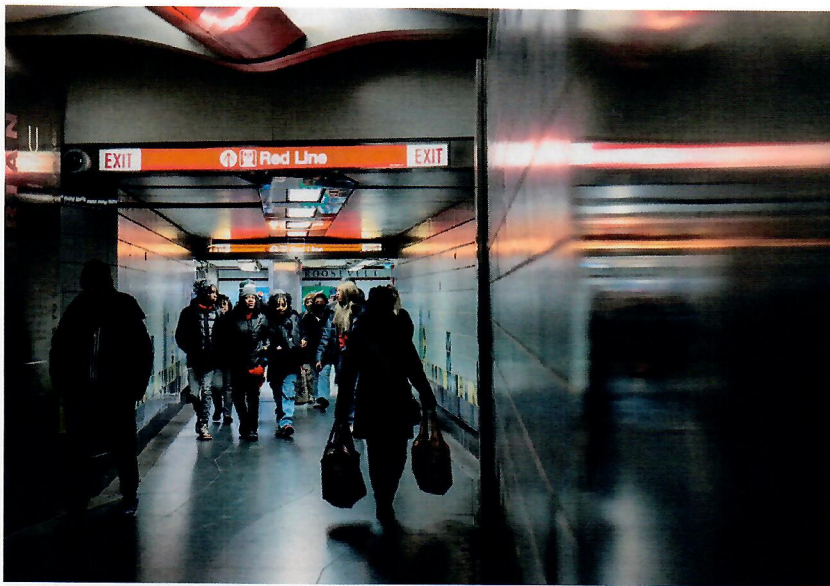
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Still, merging the transit agencies has garnered some support. The Civic Federation, a business-backed Chicago watchdog group, recently endorsed the idea, and Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle also previously expressed her support for the concept.

Part of the transit budget woes are due to steep drops in ridership since the pandemic altered typical commuting patterns. But at the CTA, in particular, President Dorval Carter has come under fire as the agency has faced a range of complaints, including about so-called ghost buses and trains, long wait times for transit and concerns about personal safety.

State Rep. Eva-Dina Delgado, a Chicago Democrat who plans to sponsor the Illinois House version of the measure, said efforts to revamp transit predate current CTA concerns, but that the agency's challenges make the conversation more timely.

"Because of some of the challenges that riders are facing, this conversation is top of mind," she said. "If service was amazing, maybe people wouldn't be asking, 'what's going on with transit?'"



Riders at the Roosevelt station on the Red Line in the Loop on Dec. 19, 2023. (Eileen T. Meslar/Chicago Tribune)

The proposal set to be introduced this week in Springfield is expected to replace the Regional Transportation Authority, which coordinates financing for the agencies, with a new Metropolitan Mobility Authority. The new agency would oversee the operation of buses, trains and paratransit, rather than having the CTA, Metra and Pace each operate their own services.

The proposal would revamp the number of board members on the new agency and who appoints them. The current system is complex and layered, regional planners have pointed out, with 47 board members across the agencies appointed by 21 elected officials. That has given nearly two dozen state, suburban and city officials varying levels of influence on the transit boards.

State Sen. Ram Villivalam, a Chicago Democrat who is set to sponsor the Senate version of the bill, said the system has posed challenges for transit operations.

“Though there are some benefits to that, there are challenges which include, one, ensuring that we have a regional mentality about service, reliability, safety, equity, accessibility and so forth,” he said. “And also accountability. Generally speaking as an agency, ensuring that there is a clear path in terms of accountability.”

The proposal is also expected to seek \$1.5 billion in additional funding for transit, though Delgado and Villivalam provided few details about where the money would come from. CMAP's recommendations for transit floated suggestions such as increasing state funding for existing transit programs, implementing new fees on drivers and expanding the sales tax. But finding new transit funding is unlikely to be simple, as the state is already [facing a challenging budget outlook](#) this year.

Delgado said the goal is for discussion about transit oversight to come before conversations about funding.

"The reform has to come first," she said. "People have to see what we're going to do to make their experience better before we start talking about revenue."

The measure is not the first recommendation to get rid of the separate transit agencies, and previous attempts have not been successful. Delgado acknowledged the bill is a "first step" in discussions about reform.

Villivalam, too, said the goal was to begin discussion. The effort could spark conversation about creating one fare system across all of the region's transit systems, he said, long a focus of transit advocates but one that has seen little progress.

"We want to create this mindset that this is a regional, sustainable public transportation (system)," he said. "It's not just essential to Illinois, but it's a regional mindset and it's integrated and customer service centered."



Metra trains in the BNSF/Metra yard at Roosevelt Road, Dec. 7, 2023. (E. Jason Wambsgans/Chicago Tribune)

The Civic Federation, which was part of a committee advising on the CMAP proposals, recently endorsed creating a single transit agency, saying in an April 25 report the move would provide a “comprehensive solution capable of addressing many of the existing operational inefficiencies while also solving for the calcified cultures, politics and bureaucratic competition dragging down our troubled system.”

One agency could lead to better-coordinated service across the different types of trains and buses and better customer service, the organization said in the report. Now, the separate agencies each compete for limited dollars under an outdated funding formula, the organization said.

Consolidating the agencies could save \$200 million to \$250 million annually, the Civic Federation said, citing consulting firm Slalom. But consolidation could take time, and the upfront costs could be significant, the report said, without citing a specific dollar amount. Merging pension systems, debt and labor agreements could also be challenging.

Consolidation is the best solution to overcome political considerations and territorial focuses, such as those between Chicago and downstate and the city and suburbs, Civic Federation President Joe Ferguson said. It is also the best way to promote access to economic opportunities, culture and entertainment, he said.

“What we really need to have is a multimodal, integrated system that best assures funding, and the formulas for funding, are applied in a way that (reflects that) need is greatest, and that actually serves, also, the value of equity,” he said.

The concerns about the CTA are an example of what can happen in a fragmented system, he said.

“The fact of the matter is that management and the fiscal situation with respect to the CTA, more broadly, is a leverage moment we should not squander,” he said.

Some of the transit agencies have pushed back on the idea. Carter, in a September letter to CMAP about the organization’s proposals, said focusing on how transit is governed instead of funding would be a “grave mistake” and a “near impossible task to practically accomplish” because providing service is complex.

“To attribute the region’s challenges to anything other than a funding shortage is to perpetuate a narrative that will – at best – serve as a distraction to the funding crisis we face, and – at worst – deepen the disparities of opportunity and access plaguing our region by claiming that it is governance and management issues that are the premier drivers of our challenges,” Carter wrote.

The way transit systems are funded, now, is “discriminatory,” Carter said in the letter, tying funding issues to race. The CTA historically has been underfunded under a 40-year-old deal reached by a downstate- and collar county-controlled Illinois General Assembly when Harold Washington was elected as the city’s first Black mayor, he said.

The deal was intended to ensure the CTA and the mayor's influence "was always controlled ultimately by other entities," Carter wrote. He cited the creation of a "suburban-controlled" RTA and a funding formula that sends 49% of the region's transportation funding to the CTA, which provides 80% of transit trips.

"This legacy funding structure of the region's transit system has led to decades of inequitable outcomes for black and brown people in terms of access to employment opportunities and the number of jobs reachable within a 45-minute commute," he said.

The RTA, in response to the Civic Federation report, also highlighted the need for more funding, but Chairman Kirk Dillard said the agency was "open to potential reforms that improve service."

Chicago-area public transit has consistently been underfunded compared to transit in other parts of the country since before the pandemic, he said in a statement. Talk of reforms must be paired with discussion about finances.

"We welcome discussion on reforms that strengthen coordination, efficiency and accountability across the regional transit system," he said. "Riders expect and deserve faster, more reliable service, and a safer and more accessible system. But reforms must come with the necessary funding to upgrade service and maximize transit's impact on the region's economy, climate, and access to opportunity for all residents."

Delgado, for her part, characterized the planned legislation as being about equity.

"Oftentimes the people who are riding transit — not always, but often — are the ones that don't have a choice, that this is their only mode of transportation," she said. "And I want to make it the gold standard. Maybe this bill starts that conversation and we get a step closer to that."

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