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MEMORANDUM

To: CMAP Board

Date: December 2, 2009

From: Bob Dean, Principal Regional Planner

Re: GO TO 2040 Policy Briefing: Public Transit

From fall 2009 to spring 2010, CMAP staff will brief the Board on key policy areas that are recommended to be among the priorities of *GO TO 2040*. At the December meeting, one of the key policy issues discussed will be **public transit**. It is expected that the *GO TO 2040* plan will recommend increasing the region's investment in its public transit system as well as promoting land use that supports transit use.

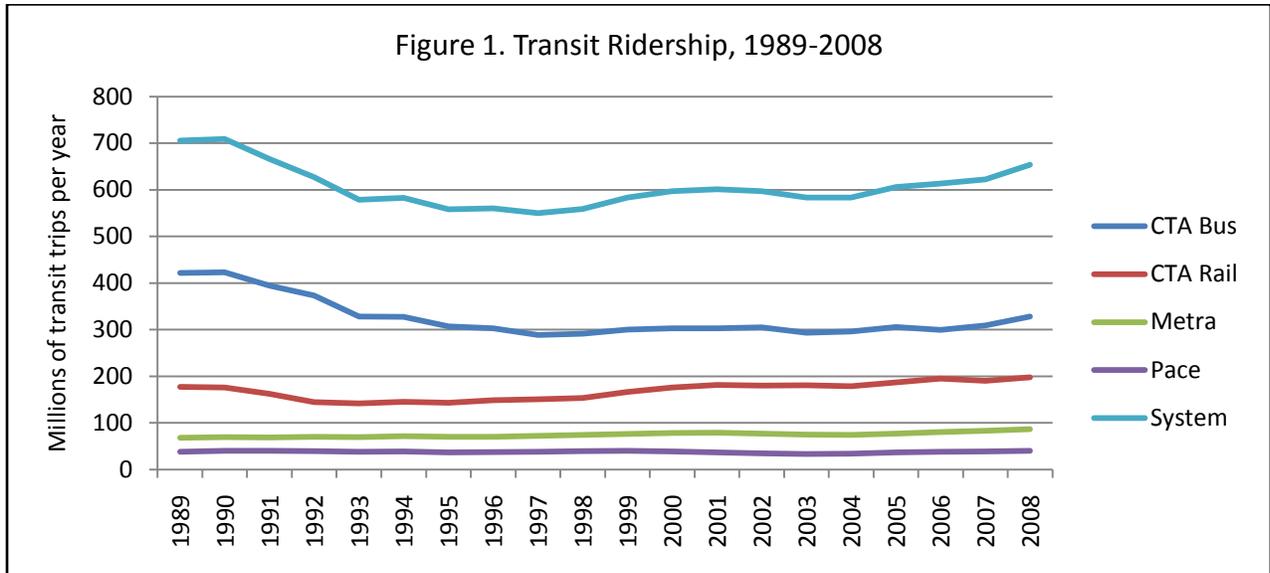
Summary

The region's public transit system is the second-largest in the nation. Service is provided by three operating agencies – the Chicago Transit Authority (CTA) rapid transit and bus, Metra commuter rail, and Pace suburban bus and ADA paratransit – under the umbrella of the Regional Transportation Authority (RTA). Together, the system provides two million rides on an average weekday, accounting for nearly 6 percent of all trips and over 12 percent of commute trips.

However, use of the transit system has not kept pace with the region's growth. Overall ridership is lower than it was twenty years ago, though it has rebounded substantially from a low point in the mid-1990s (see Figure 1). Meanwhile, the region's population and employment have grown dramatically and become more dispersed, often in development patterns that were designed solely for the automobile and are therefore difficult to serve with transit.

The RTA's 2007 *Moving Beyond Congestion* initiative highlighted the transit system's considerable capital and operating funding needs, caused by years of underinvestment. This initiative resulted in new operating funding that averted the immediate crisis but did not fully solve the problem of sustainable funding, especially for the backlog of capital maintenance needs. Due to the ongoing recession, tax revenues have fallen significantly, and service cuts

and fare increases are expected next year. In this environment, even maintaining the current transit system, let alone expanding it to meet demands for service in underserved areas, is a critical challenge.



Importance of public transit

Public transit is identified as an important part of the transportation system in the *GO TO 2040 Regional Vision*, which calls for a “broad range of integrated and seamless transportation choices that are safe, accessible, easy to navigate, affordable, and coordinated with nearby land use.” Further, the results of public engagement and technical research have further identified transit as one of the key issues to be addressed in *GO TO 2040*.

The region’s public transit system provides significant benefits to the economy, environment, and overall quality of life. By providing travel choices beyond driving, transit can reduce congestion and therefore support the region’s economy, reduce energy consumption, and improve air quality. It also supports non-motorized transportation systems (walking and biking), as most transit trips begin or end on foot or on a bicycle. Transit is shown to increase the value of nearby land, helping to support transit-oriented development or reinvestment projects. Using transit is also less expensive for an individual than owning and maintaining an automobile, and transit systems provide important travel options for our region’s lower-income residents.

Strong public support for transit was also expressed during the engagement activities that CMAP conducted during summer 2009. Over three-fourths of workshop and on-line participants favored maximizing our investment in transit, and many further emphasized the importance of transit in supplemental comments. In communities that already had transit coverage, participants wanted to preserve their existing service and improve it; in communities with limited transit service, there was strong support for expanding transit to include new areas.

Because of the proven benefits and public support for improvements to the region's transit system, it is recommended that *GO TO 2040* address transit improvements among its highest priorities.

Recommended direction for GO TO 2040

GO TO 2040 should strongly support increased investment in the region's transit system. The goals of this increased investment should be to increase the share of the region's residents who use transit, and to increase the accessibility of transit across the region. To achieve this goal, the plan should include recommendations to **maintain our current infrastructure** to move toward a state of good repair, as well as to **strategically enhance transit services**, and **expand the transit system** in underserved areas. Any improvements will require additional investment, so **sustainable financing** of transit will be a part of *GO TO 2040's* approach. Transit is shown to be most effective in places where **transit-supportive land use planning** has occurred, so this will be an area of emphasis as well. Also important to address in *GO TO 2040* is **high-speed rail**, which will primarily serve inter-regional travel rather than trips within the region; local transit connections and supportive land use planning would strengthen high-speed rail.

Potential recommendations

The RTA has estimated that the region's transit infrastructure represents a \$36 billion investment, and protecting this investment must be a high priority. For many years, there has been underinvestment in maintenance, as capital funds have sometimes been used to keep the system operating. The goal is to move the system toward a "**state of good repair**," the point at which all transit facilities are in good condition and there is no backlog of capital maintenance. It is acknowledged that a state of good repair for all facilities may not be reached within the plan's horizon, due the enormous investment that would be necessary to achieve this, but it is a ongoing goal that should be strived for. Routine rehabilitation of existing transit infrastructure is certainly less glamorous than projects that improve or expand the system, but it is critically important to preserve our current assets.

Beyond increased capital maintenance, smaller **systematic improvements and enhancements** can also improve the transit system. For example, the efficiency and attractiveness of transit can be strengthened through better traveler information systems (like CTA's Bus Tracker), vehicle and station improvements, coordination between transit modes, or traffic signal systems that give priority to buses, for example. Taken together, these small-scale improvements can be very effective at improving efficiency and increasing transit ridership, and the RTA and transit operators are encouraged to continue these types of activities.

Improving the system to meet the needs created by the past several decades of growth is also important. The summer 2009 public engagement process found significant interest in bringing new transit services to places that currently lack transit. One way to **expand the system** is through major capital projects (such as the STAR Line or the southern extension of the Red Line, for example). These projects are being examined individually through *GO TO 2040*, and the

plan will prioritize and recommend pursuit of several of them. Beyond major capital projects, expansions of the region's bus system would also serve the goal of increasing access to transit, and new service types like Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) can allow high-quality service at relatively lower cost. Based on the idea that transit access is an important asset, the *GO TO 2040* plan should recommend expansion of transit service into underserved areas, provided that it is complemented by land use planning and infrastructure investment that supports transit.

As implied above, the plan's recommendations for increasing transit service should also come with a caveat. For transit to be successful, it requires **supportive land use planning** and infrastructure investments. A new transit service in an area that is low density and not walkable is unlikely to succeed. Therefore, *GO TO 2040* should recommend that transit expansion efforts be accompanied by land use planning that seeks to create a transit-friendly environment, with investments in sidewalks, bus shelters, and other infrastructure. Further, *GO TO 2040* should consider prioritizing transit investments in places where supportive land use planning is occurring.

All of the improvements described above require more revenue than is available from current sources. Preliminary financial analysis of expected transportation revenues and costs through 2040 has shown that existing revenue sources may not even be sufficient to maintain our transportation system. The Board will also receive a report at their December meeting about *GO TO 2040's* approach to **transportation finance**; initial conclusions are that additional revenues from sources such as fuel tax increases, new user fees, or public-private partnerships are necessary to sustain and expand our transit system.

GO TO 2040 also will address **interregional high-speed rail**, which is planned to provide connections to other Midwestern metropolitan areas. It is important for high-speed rail investments not to be viewed as a replacement in any way for investments in the region's transit system. The travel markets are entirely different, with high-speed rail serving trips to other regions, rather than within the region. *GO TO 2040* should support new high-speed rail service but also insist that new revenue be found for this investment, rather than diverting the region's scarce transportation resources for this purpose.

ACTION REQUESTED: Discussion.

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