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As Addams rebuilding looms, Pace preparing new bus routes for it

Transit agency, tollway say partnership is moving forward



Pace plans to expand service on two bus routes that already use the Jane Addams Memorial Tollway to get commuters to the CTA's Blue Line in Rosemont, as well as create four additional routes. (Heather Charles, Chicago Tribune / November 1, 2012)

By **Richard Wronski**, Chicago Tribune reporter
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A first-of-its-kind partnership to expand public transit on the Jane Addams Memorial Tollway in the northwest suburbs is moving forward as the Illinois Tollway prepares to rebuild the highway, officials say.

The \$2.3 billion project — work that motorists will start seeing next year — calls for widening the Addams (Interstate 90) by one lane in each direction and making room for **mass transit**, something that hasn't been done before on any tollway.

An advisory council called the tollway's partnership with Pace a "once-in-a-lifetime

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opportunity to create a 21st-century corridor," connecting Rockford and Chicago.

Next fall, Pace plans to expand service on two bus routes that already use the tollway to get commuters to the CTA's Blue Line in Rosemont. At some point, it also plans to create four additional routes. Pace also will open four new park-and-ride lots at major interchanges where drivers will be able to board buses. Three Call-n-Ride service areas will be created to provide rides to the buses for customers who call a designated phone number.

"There's been a lot of talk about improving public transit in the northwest suburbs for the last 15 years, but the reality is there hasn't been much of an increase in transit use there," Pace Executive Director T.J. Ross said.

"Now we're poised to put our money where our mouth is. It's been difficult to do by ourselves. Having the tollway as a partner is going to make this happen," Ross said after a recent briefing with tollway officials.

Adding buses on the Addams would be another step toward putting the Chicago area on a growing list of U.S. and foreign cities that have adopted the concept of bus rapid transit, or BRT.

This month, the CTA is starting a bus rapid transit service on a limited basis along Jeffery Boulevard on Chicago's South Side. But cities such as Minneapolis and Los Angeles already have more ambitious BRT routes similar to those planned for the Addams.

The tollway established an I-90 Corridor Planning Council to find ways — other than just adding lanes — to reduce congestion and boost transportation options in the Addams corridor.

"This whole corridor has more than a million travelers a day," said Kristi Lafleur, the tollway's executive director. "If we're going to make sure this region has the right infrastructure for the future, we need to think about ... leveraging the assets we have."

The council's report recommended that the wider Addams have several other features, including congestion-priced, "managed" lanes. Drivers who use those lanes would pay a higher toll but would be guaranteed free-flowing travel.

The new inner lanes will be 14 feet wide, enough for buses. The inside shoulders also will be wider.

The report urged that the tollway "facilitate transit use, in addition to car use, of the managed lanes." It concluded with the hope that the newly reconstructed I-90 would dramatically improve the region "by enhancing mobility and accessibility, creating new travel choices and providing a jolt in economic development through job and business creation."

The document noted that \$240 million is budgeted for transit "accommodations" on the Addams, about 10 percent of the total rebuilding and widening cost.

This expenditure for mass transit might surprise tollway users paying nearly double the tolls they paid at this time last year.

The Jan. 1 toll increase is paying for the tollway's 15-year, \$12 billion systemwide expansion and rehabilitation program called Move Illinois. The Addams rebuilding is a key part.

The tollway board believes using toll revenue to pay for mass transit is appropriate, Lafleur said.

"As long as we're going to spend billions to rebuild (the Addams), we might as well spend pennies on the dollar today" to add transit, she said.

Critics disagree. Steve Stanek, a research fellow at the Heartland Institute, a Chicago-based free-market think tank, said the Illinois State Toll Highway Authority was intended to build and operate highways, not buses or mass transit.

"Tolls paid by drivers on the tollway system, with the understanding that they're going for highways, should stay there," he said.

Riders on Pace and Metra would object if part of their fares was used to add tollway lanes, Stanek contends. "So why should drivers subsidize mass transit?" he asks.

The state law that governs the tollway says, "Authority funds may not be spent for purposes not reasonably related to toll highway operations and improvements or in a manner that is not cost-effective."

Acute needs

The Addams corridor, stretching from the Kennedy Expressway through the northwest suburbs to Rockford, faces an acute need for more public transit, municipal leaders and transportation experts say.

The population along the corridor stands at more than 760,000, and businesses provide more than 485,000 jobs. But only 2 percent of the corridor's work trips are made by public transit, according to U.S. census data and the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning.

Projections for 2040 predict a 30 percent increase in employment along the corridor as well as a 12 percent increase in population. Retail employment is estimated to grow by 234 percent, the data show.

For Pace, adding routes on the Addams isn't just a way to get northwest suburbanites to the CTA's Blue Line. The routes also will enable more people to get to jobs within the Addams corridor, especially "reverse commuters" from Chicago.

Major employment destinations include Motorola, AT&T and Sears. Job hubs include Woodfield Mall, Schaumburg's office parks, Rosemont's hotels and O'Hare International Airport.

As an example of what can be done on the Addams, Pace points to the success of the express bus service on the Stevenson Expressway (I-55).

Since expanding service in 2011, using the expressway shoulders as dedicated bus-only lanes, ridership on two routes has increased dramatically, and on-time performance on both has reached 90 percent, Pace said.

Pace believes the same success can be achieved on the Addams, Ross said.

Heavy lifting next year

The tollway launched the Addams rebuilding work this year, with some advance shoulder and bridge work on the stretch between Elgin and Rockford.

But the heavy lifting begins in 2013. For starters, \$415 million worth of work is scheduled, including reconstructing and widening the far western section between Elgin and Rockford.

Advance work on the eastern section between Elgin and Rosemont, including bridge and interchange improvements and construction of retaining walls, also may begin next year.

The entire project will run through 2016.

The tollway hasn't ruled out other transit options for the Addams. Officials said the inside median could be used for rail service.

Metra officials and suburban municipal leaders once hoped that the Addams median could accommodate part of the proposed suburb-to-suburb commuter STAR rail line. But state and federal funding for the \$1 billion project has all but disappeared. Bus rapid transit on the Addams would be a cheaper alternative.

Pace has obtained nearly \$39 million in federal funding to develop the Addams bus service. Pace estimates operating costs at just over \$10 million a year.

The question for tollway officials is this: If bus rapid transit on the Addams is successful, will it cut into toll revenue that the agency is counting on to pay for the Move Illinois program? The American Public Transportation Association estimates that a bus full of passengers can take 35 cars off the highway.

Lafleur said she's not worried. As the northwest region continues to grow, the need for mobility will continue as well, she said.

"There's going to be plenty of traffic on all the roadways for years to come," Lafleur said.