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Metra's Alex Clifford: 'We want to lead by example'

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After his appointment Tuesday as **Metra's** new executive director, Alex Clifford sat down with the Tribune to talk about his plans for the transit agency. The conversation has been condensed and edited for clarity and space.

Q: You plan to "inspire and empower" at Metra. How?

A: First and foremost, we want to lead by example. This agency has come through some very difficult times. I believe this agency wants to embrace the reforms I've talked about.

Q: What's your leadership style?

A: Honest, transparent and ethical.

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Q: You posted a customer survey on Metra's website. What do you hope to learn?

A: It's a nice, quick opportunity to get the pulse of the riders. There's also a text box to allow them to give some feedback. We'll be asking nonriders, too, to give us some feedback on why they're not riding and what it might take to get them to ride our system.

Q: What will you bring to Chicago in terms of modernizing Metra or upgrading the system, for example, ticketing, universal fare cards, etc.?

A: I don't come in with any preconceived notion on what that (universal fare) system should be. We do need to investigate

what the options are. It might be smart card, it might be something else. We should be working together (with the RTA, **CTA** and Pace) on a reasonable solution.

Q: Metra's been embroiled in a leadership scandal. How do you plan on dealing with this?

A: It's important to regain the trust of the riding public and the Legislature. I think we can get the word out to the legislators with personal visits, to labor leaders, the public, to the staff.

Q: Plans for expanding Metra, for example with the proposed suburb-to-suburb STAR Line, have been stymied by a lack of funding. Is there a way to grow the system?

A: I have taken a look at the (Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning's) Go to 2040 long-range plan. One of the most important things we can do (at Metra) is look at the strategic plan we have here. That strategic plan may need to be revisited. If it doesn't exist, then we will be creating a strategic plan, and that plan will be the best tool in working with the board to try to identify what those priorities will be for funding in the coming years.