



## CITYSCA

A DAILY CHICAGO JOURNAL ABOUT THE CITY  
BY BLAIR KAMIN

« Lakefront overpass gets approval from plan commission | Main | As Chicago contemplates a 21st Century piece of lakefront infrastructure, here's what the New Deal accomplished in the 20th Century »

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### Newly-approved lakefront overpass is no bridge to nowhere

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#### Improving the lakefront trail

A \$40 million-to-\$45 million plan for an elevated pathway on the lakefront trail near Navy Pier is designed to unclutter the trail for cyclists, pedestrians and other users.

#### PROPOSED IMPROVEMENTS

- Phase 1: (2012-14)**  
Path extends from an area to the north of Jane Addams Memorial Park to Ogden Slip, including a spur to Navy Pier
- Phase 2: (2014-16)**  
Path built over the planned DuSable Park
- Phase 3: (2016-18)**  
Path built over the Chicago River

SOURCE: Illinois Department of Transportation



An elevated pathway that will ease some of the worst bottlenecks on Chicago's 18-mile lakefront trail sailed through its final city hearing Thursday, but on this blog, plenty of readers were pounding it.

"Why are we doing this now?" said one, alluding to chronic financial woes in Washington, Springfield and Chicago. "How are we going to pay for this?"

Another reader compared the officials backing the plan to drunken sailors on shore leave. "The difference," this reader added, "is that a drunken sailor can pay for it."

With all due respect to these cherished readers, I think they're wrong: This project, which is called the Navy Pier Flyover and would cost up to \$45 million in federal and state funds, is exactly the kind of infrastructure project that Chicago and the country needs.

It will create much-needed construction jobs. It will encourage commuters to bike or walk instead of drive, cutting air pollution. It will promote the economy by improving access to Navy Pier, the state's top tourist

attraction. And it will enhance Chicago's greatest public space, the lakefront, by alleviating dangerous chokepoints like the one on the lower level of the Lake Shore Drive Bridge, where drivers, cyclists, inline skaters, joggers and pedestrians all jockey for space.



Other readers instantly grasped these points. "THANK GOD!!!!!!!!!!!" said one. "I use that area often and it's AWFUL!" Added another: "One word – tourism. Just imagine the photos of the city that people will get from this vantage point. 'In Chicago, wish you were here!' I'd guess it pays for itself in no time."

In other words, this isn't a bridge to nowhere. And it didn't come from nowhere, either.

City officials have been pushing it since at least 2002. Two years ago,

the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for

Planning, which decides how federal congestion mitigation funds are spread throughout the area, gave it unanimous approval.

The agency's reasons were utterly sound: The lakefront path is no longer just a recreational trail. It's a through-way for downtown commuters, especially since the 2004 opening of Millennium Park's McDonald's Cycle Center. City surveyors have found that hundreds of cyclists use it to get to and from their jobs.

America spends billions building and fixing the nation's highways, using tax dollars to subsidize energy-wasting driving. But let Chicago try to build a transformative piece of infrastructure and people go nuts. They're reacting against the idea of the elevated pathway, not its promising design.



With guidance from Janet Attarian, a project director for the Chicago Department of Transportation, the architects for the project's first phase, the Chicago firm of Muller + Muller, have wisely conceived of the elevated pathway as an unobtrusive but memorable viaduct.

By following the profile of Lake Shore Drive and having spans of 100 feet between its articulated steel columns, the pathway would retain the shoreline's openness. The spine-like structure of columns and brackets

would twist and turn in harmony with the Drive. The skeletal design could look as good from below as from above. Yes, that will be more expensive than a clunky, ramrod-straight pedestrian bridge. But such treatment is appropriate for the lakefront, Chicago's world-renowned front yard.

At the Lake Shore Drive Bridge, where a broad new sidewalk would cantilever outward from the bridge's lower level, the plans are appropriately self-effacing, eschewing modernist expressionism for a traditional look that will not disrupt the bridge's Art Deco design.



There are, of course, lingering questions, like the overhanging, curving screen walls meant to shield residents of adjoining Lake Point Tower from the trail (left). The architects insist that their shifting profiles will suggest unfolding flower petals. But if poorly handled, the walls may seem confining and prison-like. The same goes for the plan to tunnel the new Lake Shore Drive Bridge sidewalk through the bottom of the span's bridge-tender houses.

the Parks is pushing the city to ensure that the viaduct doesn't encroach upon the perpetually delayed, still-to-be-built DuSable Park.

Yet on the whole, the prospects are good.

Funding for the first two phases of the three-part project is in hand, city officials say, and work could start on the first phase (between the Jane Addams Park on the north and Ogden Slip on the south) as early as spring 2012. The target completion date is 2018, which is not exactly lightning-fast. City officials attribute the slow timetable to the fact that the work will be done in close quarters and the need to keep the current bike path open during construction.

What it adds up to is a sophisticated, sensitive work of infrastructure that will advance a series of significant causes, from the economic to the environmental. The design constitutes a powerfully effective rebuttal to those who think that a better future can be gained simply by slashing spending.

**POSTSCRIPT:** For a list of New Deal-era public works projects in the Chicago area, including the Lake Shore Drive Bridge, click [here](#).