

Chicago Identified for Transportation Innovation

NRDC's Smarter Cities project reveals how Chicago and fourteen other cities across the U.S. are raising the bar for affordable and accessible public transit.

By Nathan Mann



The National Resource Defense Council (NRDC) recently released the findings from its Smarter Cities project, a transportation study identifying fifteen metropolitan regions with the nation's leading transportation policies and practices. The study, created in collaboration with the Center for Neighborhood Technology (CNT), rated U.S. regions based on public transit availability, use and cost, as well as other factors such as automobile use and innovative, sustainable transportation programs.

The fifteen metro regions identified as "Smarter Cities" for transportation include seven large regions (populations greater than 1 million people): Boston, Chicago, Philadelphia, Portland, OR, New York, San Francisco and Washington, D.C.; four medium-size regions (between 250,000 and 1 million people): Boulder, Honolulu, Jersey City and New Haven, CT; and four small regions (less than 250,000 people): Bremerton, WA, downstate Champaign-Urbana, Lincoln, NE and Yolo, CA.

"Innovative transit policies not only benefit the environment, but they also add richness to urban life by making city attractions and neighbor-

hoods more accessible," said Paul McRandle, the project's Senior Editor.

"By enhancing regional transportation programs, we can improve our quality of life, boost our local economies, reduce air pollution and even benefit public health by making biking and walking safer and more enjoyable for commuters." The transportation study is the second to be released by NRDC's Smarter Cities project, which aims to recognize and profile what leading metropolitan regions are doing to make themselves more efficient, sustainable and livable.

The study noted that Chicago is not only home to one of the oldest and largest regional public transportation systems in the country, the Second City has long been a nationwide transportation hub. Two million bus and rail riders course through the system each day, along with the over two billion tons of freight every year. Helping Chicago to earn a place among the top fifteen smart cities was GO TO 2040, the regional plan designed by the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP) to guide the area toward affordable and innovative ways to manage increased demands on transportation and freight.

The digital revolution has supplied bus riders with a powerful tool to take advantage of Chicago's public transportation. The Chicago Transit Authority's (CTA) bus tracker phone app and text service informs riders of where in the system their next bus is. The CTA has also created a framework whereby business owners can develop their own applications to display the information in their restaurant, store or other location.

The biggest hurdle for electric vehicle market growth is

infrastructure. A \$1.9 million Recovery Act grant is the basis for Chicago to be electric vehicle-ready by next year, with 280 electric vehicle charging stations throughout the city and its surrounding suburbs. The stations will be installed in downtown parking garages, at O'Hare and Midway airports, retail store parking lots and tollway plazas. Among the first of the new stations' users will be the City of Chicago, which will power a fleet of garbage and recycling trucks that soon will be coming online.

The city has also designated nearly forty charging stations for I-GO car sharing that will add solar canopies to its stations. I-GO, the Chicago nonprofit and brainchild of CNT, views itself as an extension of the public transit system; this became manifest when the car-sharing service offered a seamless integration with the region's public transportation system through a CTA/I-Go smart card.

One novel approach has been to train taxi drivers in the tactics of "hyper-miling," a set of driving techniques and maintenance standards designed to increase gas mileage. As of December 2010, all newly licensed taxi drivers are required to receive training in tactics such as stopping and starting slowly, unloading unnecessary cargo before driving and regularly checking tire pressure.

Six of the country's seven largest railroad carriers have terminals in the Chicago Metro region, bringing nearly 500 freight trains through the region each day. The freight traffic creates economic and industrial growth for the region—but also pockets of congestion, bottle-necked traffic at rail crossings and increased air pollution.



The Chicago Region Environmental and Transportation Efficiency Program (CREATE) is an unprecedented public-private partnership between the U.S. Department of Transportation, the State of Illinois, the City of Chicago, six private rail companies, Amtrak and Chicago's commuter rail service Metra.

CREATE was organized to increase the efficiency of freight movement in Chicago. Through a total of 71 projects over the course of two decades, the program has outlined a strategy to upgrade four widely used corridors, increase capacity and improve rail network connections throughout the region.

Ten projects have been completed so far. Once fully implemented, the program is expected to create over 170,000 jobs and prevent the equivalent emission of 1.6 million metric tons of carbon dioxide each year.

The Department of Housing and Urban Development's Sustainable Community Challenge granted 42 municipalities in Chicago's south suburbs \$2.3 million in competitive federal funding. The program will help to implement a multi-jurisdictional strategy to revitalize the railway system, with an emphasis around transit, intermodal freight industries, green manufacturing and environmental stewardship. In addition to job creation, the project hopes to recoup all of the seed money in new income to the area over the next decade.

"Chicago's south suburbs are poised to thrive with their transportation infrastructure and proximity to Chicago and international freight hubs," said Scott Bernstein, president of CNT. "Our innovative redevelopment strategy serves as a model for communities across



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the country similarly endowed with passenger and freight rail assets."

All of this is not to suggest that the Chicago region couldn't go further. According to the study, Philadelphia has expanded its transit system in certain neighborhoods to increase residents' access to fresh food, alleviating the problem of "food deserts" that

are endemic to Chicago's poorer areas.

Nearly all of Jersey City residents, about 98%, live within a half mile of public transportation. And as much has been made locally of the extension to the riverfront walkway, it pales compared to the 52 miles of pathway in Boulder that continues without ever crossing traffic. ☐