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How Much Do You Know About Transportation?

By **JAMES WARREN**
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Electronic clickers in hand, the Chicago metropolitan area's most influential transportation officials gathered on Thursday morning and took a quiz. Try out some of the questions:

There were 8.1 million people in the Chicago region in 2002. How many additional people are expected to be here in 2040?

A. 1.3 million; B. 2.8 million; C. 3.1 million; D. 4 million.

How much do families who live in the region spend on transportation each year?

A. \$14 billion; B. \$17 billion; C. \$22 billion; D. More than \$30 billion.

How many governments are responsible for the region's transportation system?

A. 247; B. 278; C. 325; D. 380.

What percentage of unlinked trips (you don't stop to pick up a child or shop, etc., before reaching a final destination) in the Chicago region are made on public transportation?

A. 6.9; B. 8.9; C. 19.5; D. 37.1.

What percentage of C.T.A. train riders live in the suburbs?

A. 11; B. 26; C. 34; D. 47.

What percentage of Metra and Pace riders live in Chicago?

A. 12; B. 25; C. 33; D. 50.

What would the current state gas tax of 19 cents per gallon be if it had been indexed to inflation since it was last raised in 1990?

A. 25 cents per gallon; B. 32 cents per gallon; C. 41 cents per gallon; D. 52 cents per gallon.

Don't fret. The experts were all over the place. Indeed, two-thirds of a group of more than 100 got that first one wrong. By 2040, we should have another 2.8 million people, or a 34 percent increase.

As for the other queries, the answers are:

Families spend more than \$30 billion, or 27 percent of their income, on transit.

A dizzying 380 governmental units are involved in transit, including 284 municipalities, 83 townships, I.D.O.T., R.T.A., C.T.A., Metra, Pace and the Illinois State Toll Highway Authority.

A mere 6.9 percent of unlinked trips are made on public transit.

Twenty-six percent of C.T.A. riders live in the suburbs.

Thirty-three percent of Metra/Pace riders live in the city.

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Your per-gallon gas tax would be 32 cents, instead of 19 cents, if indexed to inflation since 1990.

The quiz was a warm-up act for a regional transportation summit on Earth Day, hosted by Paula Wolff, chairman of the toll highway authority, and featuring an appearance by Gov. Pat Quinn. It included the heads of Metra, Pace, the C.T.A., R.T.A., I.D.O.T., the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning and many others.

There is scant dispute on the importance of transportation. As Ms. Wolff framed it, it's the backbone of the regional economy. It affects where we live, where businesses locate, the air we breathe, time spent with families and our household finances.

Of course, there is the craziness of the involvement of 380 governmental entities. Throw in city-suburban and Chicago-Downstate tussles over financing, as well as our dependence on the automobile and political cowardice over raising taxes, and the challenge is clear.

Some attendees pointed with hope to voter passage of a St. Louis, Mo., County referendum in early April. It backed a sales tax increase for improvement and expansion of city and suburban mass transit.

Voters passed that increase because they were convinced the investment would improve their local economy and quality of life. But I wonder how persuasive that argument would be elsewhere, particularly in a recession.

"Use crisis to test people's desire to pay money if they can see a clear plan that will reduce their cost of living," said Joel Rogers, a speaker at the event and a professor of law, political science and sociology at the University of Wisconsin who runs the Center on Wisconsin Strategy, a policy center. "Of course, it may destroy you politically," he said, drawing guffaws from attendees, and for good reason.

Different jurisdictions don't trust one another and act "like sick people trying to steal one another's medicine," he said. It's why no state has a unified plan when it comes to transit, land use, housing and energy, he told me later.

"The raw politics make it difficult to get the financing needed for a smart, regional transportation plan," said Bill Morris, a toll highway board member and a former state senator and mayor of Waukegan. "It's fatal for a Democrat to call for higher taxes, and the first group which perceives it's shorted will yell."

It's too darn bad. C.T.A. pass in hand, I grabbed a Michigan Avenue bus and headed north.

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