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Give a Minute wants your car-free travel ideas



By John Greenfield

Ever wish you could stick a Post-it note on the computer screen of an influential city planner with your idea about how to make it easier to walk, bike or use transit in Chicago? The Give a Minute campaign gives you a chance to do just that.

Launched in Chicago on November 2 by CEOs for Cities, an urban planning think tank, the campaign allows citizens to share their ideas for improving car-free travel with the public as well as key leaders in the city's green transportation scene. These suggestions appear as colorful notes on the website www.giveaminute.info. You can post your ideas on the website or text them to 312-380-0436 until December 10.

A quick look at the Post-its on the website provides fast food for thought, ideas for better biking, walking and transit in a format that makes Twitter seem long-winded. "Make sure heaters are working at all stations," says one post. "Chicago winters are brutal." "Free or reduced-price bike maintenance and basic repair classes," says another. I posted, "Better-marked crosswalks, and more enforcement of laws requiring drivers to stop for pedestrians in the crosswalks."

On December 8-10, CEOs for Cities and the Chicago Architecture Foundation will host the Connectivity Challenge, a conference bringing together national urban planning experts and local transportation and planning agencies to discuss the best of the car-free transportation ideas harvested from the website. According to the organizers, the goal of the symposium is to produce new ideas and "quick start" strategies that will be



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promoted in book form, through a promotional tour and as a national policy platform.

I called CEOs for Cities communication director Natalie Campbell for details about the project.

What is the campaign all about?

We worked with a company out of New York called Local Projects to develop this campaign. The idea was public engagement through technology. The campaign is launching in Chicago and we'll take it to other cities as well, including Memphis, San Jose and New York.

In Chicago the idea is to start a public dialogue about how we can make it easier to get around the city without a car. The CTA is a sponsor of the campaign, so we have about car card ads in CTA buses and trains. We're promoting the campaigning the campaign throughout the city, asking, "Hey Chicago, what would encourage you to walk, bike or take CTA more often?"

We worked with Terry Peterson, the chairman of the CTA, Ron Burke with Active Transportation Alliance and Stan Day with SRAM [a Chicago-based bike parts manufacturer] to be our faces of the campaign, our "response leaders." They're the people asking that question to citizens.

So we launched the campaign about two weeks ago and so far we've had over 500 responses and they've all been really good responses. We're pretty excited about the campaign. We're compiling all these recommendations and saying, what are the common themes here? Then we're holding an event December 8th through the 10th called the Connectivity Challenge.

That event will together nine national experts on transit mobility and accessibility and a group of local stakeholders which includes some of the local stakeholders: the CTA, Active Transportation Alliance, the Regional Transportation Authority, CMAP [Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, Metra, the Chicago Department of Transportation. It will bring all those people together to explore this ambition of a future where Chicago residents can get around more easily without a car.



So you're collecting all these ideas, all these electronic Post-it notes. How will these ideas guide the recommendations of the Connectivity Challenge?

The format of this event is the local stakeholder teams are going to present existing projects and goals for the future. This national team is coming to town with a fresh eye and a different perspective. They're going to be working hard and working fast over two and a half days to explore what we call "twelve big

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ideas." We'll take the citizens' responses and narrow them into the categories of biking, walking and CTA.

So if someone is saying "more bike lanes" we're letting the local and national experts know this is what we're hearing from the people. We'll think about how we can turn these recommendations into big ideas, whether it's infrastructure or policy recommendations.

What is a "quick start strategy"?

A quick start strategy could be something small, like Chicago businesses setting up bike training programs for their employees. For example, Active Transportation alliance has people who go into companies and say, "Don't be afraid to ride your bike to work – here's some easy tips on how to navigate around the city." Because a lot more people are biking now but it's still a segmented audience. So if you can reach out to other people and make them not as wary of riding their bikes, then you're expanding ridership.

I was at a meeting where we were discussing other quick start ideas and one of them was making sure people have bike racks at their offices because a lot of people have trouble parking their bikes when they get to work. Or at the el stops, making sure that there are bike racks there. Because when we're talking about connectivity it's not just not just biking or walking. You can ride your bike to an el stop, jump on the train and get to work, but you need to have a bike rack at the el station.

So what are you guys hoping to achieve with this campaign?

The big ambition is to create a future where it's easy to get around Chicago without owning a car. In the short term, people are always looking for ways to be engaged and this program is a way for citizens to talk back to their city and having them feel like they have a say in it. We really are connecting them with changemaking leaders. Terry and Ron and Stan are responding directly to some of the best recommendations. And there really are a lot of great recommendations on the site.

So we're bringing those ideas to our national, or international, expert team. We have Jan Gehl from Denmark who's one of the world's foremost urban planners and architects. So you really do have a say. And that's the challenge people have, feeling that they really are able to help create change, so programs like this help people feel like they can make a difference.

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