

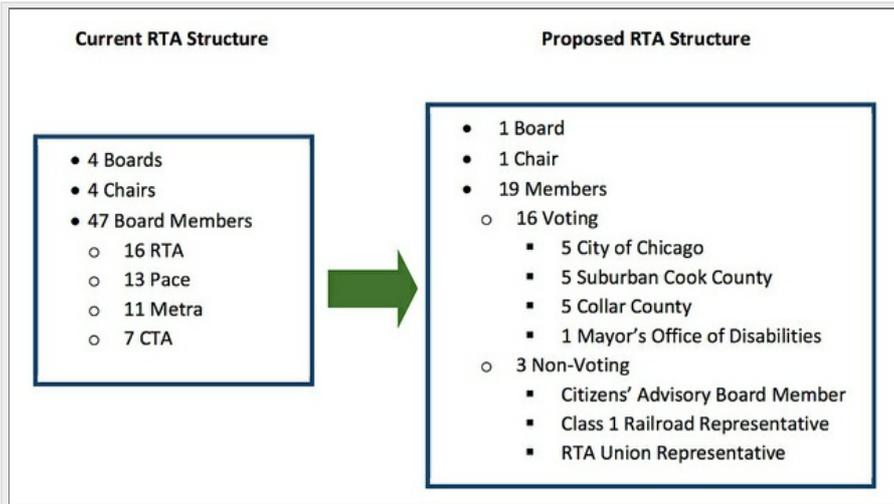
## STREETSBLOG CHICAGO

Thursday, March 20, 2014

7 Comments

### A Clearer, More Concise Regional Transit Proposal From Senator Biss

by [Steven Vance](#)



Biss's unified RTA proposal has 19 members, all appointed by the governor with approval from 10 of 13 members of a regional transit council with locally appointed members.

At least one Illinois legislator supports a unified transit agency, even though [RTAboard chairman John Gates](#) and Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel [have declared their opposition](#).

Senator Daniel Biss (D-9th, Evanston, Glenview) published a proposal [\[PDF\]](#) back in November, saying "the CTA, Metra, and Pace should combine into a single new Regional Transit Authority." That was months before Governor Quinn's transit task force issued a similar recommendation, due to be released in final form next week.

Biss's proposal calls for a streamlined RTA with gubernatorial appointees who would need to be vetted by representatives from Chicago and its suburbs. While it leaves a few key questions unanswered — namely, how long people would serve on the new agency's board, and how they could be removed from office — the plan is a solid attempt at reforming regional transit governance without turning the new agency into the governor's plaything.

In the proposal, a new RTA with a 19-member board would replace the existing RTA board, three service boards, and their combined 47 members. The governor would appoint every board member, with the supermajority approval of a new Regional Transit Council — made up of members appointed by the Chicago mayor, suburban Cook County commissioners, and board presidents from the collar counties (DuPage, Kane, Will, McHenry, and Lake).

The new RTA board would comprise five representatives from Chicago, five from suburban Cook County, five from the collar counties, and one representative from Chicago's Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities. New to Chicagoland transit boards would be three non-voting positions: a Citizens' Advisory Board member, a Metra operating railroads rep, and an RTA union rep.

While the task force recommended a unified transit agency with three service divisions, Biss outlines four: rapid transit (the 'L'), bus (both CTA and Pace services), paratransit (which Pace operates), and commuter rail (Metra). The RTA executive director would hire a manager for each transit division, to be approved by the board, and managers could only serve a maximum of two six-year terms. The RTA executive director could relieve division managers with board approval. It seems that Biss is creating a way to hire and fire that would have avoided the scandal surrounding the resignation of Alex Clifford, former Metra CEO. Each service division would have a board committee to recommend approval of its budget.

Biss recognizes the importance of working together for cohesive service planning and budgeting by involving the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, the region's federally-mandated planning organization, to help staff the fifth committee:

It makes sense to maintain a separation between the management of day-to-day operations of the

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different modes of transit, which is why each division should have its own committee. However, when it comes to long-term planning and prioritizing capital investments, it is absolutely crucial for the systems to be working strategically in concert. Therefore, a single capital budget committee should be responsible for approving each division's annual capital budget.

The Biss proposal still leaves rail transit split between two silos, based on which railroad owned which tracks over a century ago. The task force's recommendations also keep transit services aligned by the current agencies, rather than by mode.

Chicagoland transit has a continuum of services: the Loop has a lot of 'L' stops and frequent service, as does the Metra Electric, while Metra's Heritage Corridor has few stops and infrequent service. Most of the rail transit system falls somewhere in between.

Asingle rail service division could take what are now called "commuter rail" services, like the Metra Electric, and give them higher frequencies appropriate to providing good [access to job centers that have developed in the suburbs](#). Nothing would prevent a rail division from continuing to contract commuter rail operations to the freight railroads, but setting up a commuter rail-only division would likely ensure that Metra service continue as-is.

Other than the question of term lengths and how board members can be removed from office, Biss's proposal considers nearly everything in a transition from "RTA+3" to plain RTA. He describes how the RTA's administrative funding share would increase, and how funds now going to CTA, Metra, and Pace would be divided among the new service divisions.

Biss doesn't stop at reorganizing the RTA in his proposal, though. He recognizes the mutual relationship of land use planning and private development in providing transit, where transit is the start of a positive feedback loop that results in greater economic activity.

Transit, working "hand in glove with public and private developers, land use policy, and economic activity... creates a 'virtuous cycle' where more development near transit nodes results in increased ridership." Consequently, increased ridership "bolsters the system's fiscal position and supports businesses near transit nodes." That leads to increased property values "in the transit shed," Biss says, and that stable tax base results in higher government revenues from which to reinvest in transit.

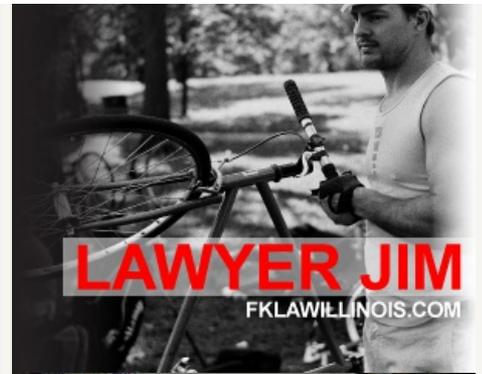
Additionally, Biss says any new state enterprise zones — places where tax breaks are used to "stimulate growth in economically depressed areas" — should be located near, and plan around, existing public infrastructure like transit. The Illinois Department of Transportation has a similar program that helps "businesses modernize state infrastructure serving their location," but it should be amended to "include elements of complete streets policies [that] would help incentivize businesses to develop walkable sites that are located near transit."

IDOT's involvement in regional planning comes into play as well. CMAP used to be funded by a "Comprehensive Regional Planning Fund" that was created by the state legislature but eliminated in 2010. IDOT now funds CMAP directly, but Biss calls for a new, dedicated fund to avoid leaving "CMAP too susceptible to IDOT's short-term pressures," as it has [sometimes proven to be](#).

Biss's proposal claims that its structure "reflects the geographic priorities — and, yes, tensions — that currently dominate our transit discussions," ensuring that "these debates coexist with a unified planning process and a streamlined administration." Unlike the task force's draft proposals that could [give the governor more power](#), the Biss proposal includes the level of detail that a thoughtful review of this subject requires. It's both optimistic that transit can flourish in Chicagoland, and confidently suggests a new structure that respects existing boundaries without being beholden to them.



Combining rail modes into a single division could help Metra run more like rapid transit than freight train service. Photo: Jennifer Rogers



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**Elliott Mason** ago

I really don't think Metra has any idea what a game-changer even twice- or thrice start) would have on their ridership. Once people realized they could RELY on it as entire lives around making The One True Train, modeshare would go through the

Well, through the roof compared to where it is NOW, anyhow. And presumably ru expensive (about) than running them every two hours.

2

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**BlueFairlane** → Elliott Mason ago

Here's something I'm pondering, and I'm not sure what I objectively think

My wife and I are somewhat burned out on the city experience, and we s where we've lived for 10 years and heading for the suburbs the last time c were the Metra schedules ... or lack thereof. We both know that the adde might gain from the move, but we were afraid of getting caught in some I

Do we represent some demographic? Is it possible that Metra's limited acc head to the suburbs?

1

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**Elliott Mason** → BlueFairlane ago

They contribute to the fact that people who don't want to structur suburban living, yes.

^

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**R** → Elliott Mason ago

Yes that is very true. I've heard the term "blink transportation" and I thnl service provides this type of service in which a person can head to a statk service without waiting or "blinking". With core capacity grants on the way well and looking to improve, quickly at that without falling too far behind. N be seen...

^

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**Elliott Mason** → R ago

CTA is mostly there on trains (though the consistent, should-just-b Y is insulting and annoying, especially when they express constantl connect station).

The busses, however, are Metra-level abysmal in large stretches o

One specific example: I live near Pulaski and Wilson. My husband c bikes, otherwise CTA. If he does not manage to leave the house E apart. It then stays that way till about 9:30, at which point they ge

This is insane. It is often faster for him to walk down Pulaski to the make his One True Train, Metra-style. In the afternoons, trying to has a similar problem: if he's not at the bus stop by 6:15, the 45m

This is all a lot more visible now because of Bus Tracker, so at leas MY BUS to the universe at large ... Kudos to them for that much actually looking at their internal 'what is really happening' data and t them, they just think 45min headways in the middle of rush hour a

see mor

^

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**Jim Mitchell** → Elliott Mason ago

As one who was once tied to that schedule, including the late night one-an classes), I lived in Buffalo Grove. I got out of class at 8:30, which meant :



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david vartanoff Thanks for the J14 ridership ##. I am certainly pleased to hear it is succeeding. I am curious...

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a 9:35 train to the Arlington Park Metra station, then drive home, and I re to be back in my desk at work at 8:30 the next morning. It sucked.

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**JacobEPeters**

"setting up a commuter rail-only division would likely ensure that Metra service cor

That could be argued, but the difference is that board members of the Metra cor committee. Which would likely mean that these members would see the parallels | least. Because these board members would also come from varying parts of the suburban areas, or commuter rail frequency could be increased where it serves C planning all parts of regional transit, the distinction between heavy rail and commu freight service or not.

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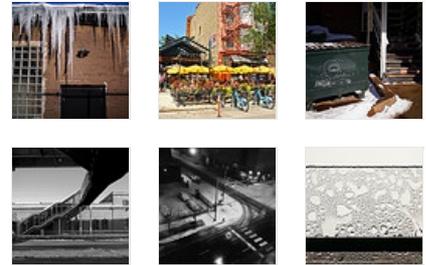
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