



Chicago Water Taxi

City of Chicago, Cook County

The problem

As the 3rd largest metropolitan area in the US, daily transportation demands are immense and growing every year. The realities of constant traffic congestion, limited or expensive parking, and rising fuel prices have dulled the allure of commuting by single-occupant vehicle. Air quality and public health concerns have further put the emphasis on the need for alternative transportation modes. For commuters and tourists alike, the inadequacy of transit services for the last mile on either end of the trip is a barrier to leaving the car at home and relying on alternative modes.

The solution

Connecting the various forms of public transportation and extending the reach of the “last mile” through alternative transportation can help to enhance a viable transportation option for millions of daily users, and extend it to new riders. While the Chicago River is regularly used for freight and tourism, it also has potential to be utilized as a transportation mode. The Chicago Water Taxi has taken an active role in promoting the river as a commuter’s escape from traffic congestion, to connect them to their final destination. Their main dock is at Madison street, between the city’s two major train stations – Union and Ogilvie Stations. Metra commuters and Amtrak travelers both use these stations. With hundreds of thousands of riders commuting into these two stations each day, utilizing a water taxi can reduce the number of auto trips and ease the strain on public transit, especially during rush hour. The Chicago Water Taxi provides this viable option by linking Union and Ogilvie stations to business, social, cultural and tourist destinations.

The process

In 1999, Wendella Sightseeing Boats designed and subsidized the Chicago Riverbus as a way for commuters arriving at Union and Ogilvie Stations to bypass the construction and congestion on Wacker Drive. The Riverbus used the Chicago River, an extremely undervalued transportation asset, to alleviate surface congestion. That same year, the Chicago Department of Transportation sponsored a grant proposal for the Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality program (CMAQ) to help grow the river boat commuting service. In December of 1999, the Policy Committee approved the grant for \$526,000. The grant was used to build the MV Bravo, the Water Taxi vessel with the highest capacity and the best fuel efficiency.

Eventually, stops were added at Clark and LaSalle streets giving service to additional business and tourist locations in the downtown area. In 2007, the Riverbus was rebranded as the Chicago Water Taxi, and at this point it had developed a faithful base of commuters who relied on the taxi during rush hour to get to and from their places of employment. As of 2011, the Chicago Water Taxi operates three vessels. An additional stop has been added in Chinatown, and efforts to expand its operation further are in the planning stages. There has been an increase in ridership every year since the Riverbus became the Chicago Water Taxi, with July and August of 2011 hitting record ridership levels for the taxi.

Community considerations

Traditionally, Chicagoans think of waterborne transportation as a tourist attraction. It is important to convey to Chicagoans that while waterborne transportation is an untraditional means of transit, it is nonetheless a reliable, efficient, and environmentally-friendly means of getting around the downtown area. Chicago

Overview

The Chicago Water Taxi provides an intermodal link between the city’s major train stations and various cultural, tourist, and business destinations mitigating both traffic congestion and transportation emissions. The Water Taxi service makes commuter trains coming from Chicago’s various suburban communities a viable option to suburban commuters who otherwise could not reach their destination using commuter rails alone.

CMAP Resources

- [Public Transportation Strategy Paper](#)
- [Waterway Mgt. Strategy Paper](#)
- [Public-Private Partnerships Strategy Paper](#)
- [GO TO 2040 Chapter on Livable Communities](#)

GO TO 2040

Recommendation: Regional Mobility-

Increase commitment to public transit.



For more information

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Water Taxi riders have been overwhelmingly supportive of the Water Taxi and have continually given positive reviews online and in the press. A challenge for attracting new commuters is to change the perception of the water taxi from a tourist adventure to a reliable alternative to the bus and automobile.

In addition to partnering with the City of Chicago for the CMAQ grant, other collaborations have been essential to expand their business. The Army Corps of Engineers have used the Water Taxis numerous times as a means of surveying the river in the downtown area. In the process of future expansion, the Army Corps is the first organization that the company will go to get feedback and begin planning. The Coast Guard oversees their vessel safety and training programs. In summer of 2011, Commander Bailey of the Coast Guard awarded medals of merit to Chicago Water Taxi crew for their outstanding performance during two emergency situations they encountered on the river this year. In the first incident a Water Taxi evacuated the passengers of a passing ship that had a severe engine room fire, and in the second instance, a water taxi pulled a drowning woman out of the Chicago River.

Outcomes

Recently, the Water Taxi has been solicited by prospective riders to expand to new areas. Continual positive feedback from the public is helping direct where additional stops are needed to better serve our region's population. Currently, the Water Taxi operates from mid-March through the end of November. During the off season, many Water Taxi riders drive to the city from suburban locations, resulting in increased traffic congestion and emissions. During the peak Water Taxi season from June to September, an average of 1,500 - 2,500 commuters take the Water Taxi every day. On the weekend, the Water Taxi continues to provide service for local and international tourists visiting the city.

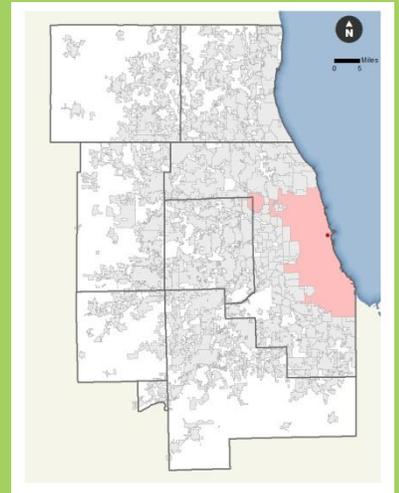
Lessons learned

The Chicago Water Taxi aspires to encourage alternative modes of transportation such as waterborne commuting which is more economically and environmentally feasible through their increasing popularity. Forms of mass transit such as commuter rails, buses, and water taxis, become more efficient by working together providing intermodal links to each other. By doing so, these forms of mass transit become more efficient and practical by giving commuters a more diverse set of options and destinations.

Contact Lindsay Banks (lbanks@cmap.illinois.gov) to submit a case study.

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Location Map:



Additional Resources

- [Commuting by Boat in London](#)
- [Coast Guard Recognizes Wendella Water Taxi Crew](#)



Service has expanded to include Chinatown.



Not everyone uses the water taxi to get to work; sometimes it's just fun.

