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Bill would merge transportation, planning agencies

Goal is increased transit use, elimination of duplicate services, legislator says



(Tribune illustration)

By Richard Wronski, Chicago Tribune reporter

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In response to critics who contend the Regional Transportation Authority is broken, legislation has been introduced in Springfield that calls for merging the RTA and the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning into a new entity.

The reborn agency — the bill doesn't specify a name — would have the transportation oversight power of the RTA along with the planning, land-use and funding authority of CMAP.

Its 18-member board would be similar in political and geographical representation to the RTA's and CMAP's, coming from Chicago and the surrounding counties. But there would be a new political wrinkle: Three additional members would be appointed by the governor.

Under the legislation, the new agency would have specific goals, particularly "doubling the use of public transit" by 2040 and eliminating waste and duplicate efforts by RTA and CMAP.

"You've got to set goals," said State Sen. Terry Link, D-Waukegan, the bill's sponsor. "If you don't set goals, there's no incentive to work harder."

Link said his bill, the Transportation Modernization Act, would streamline the planning and oversight agencies "to more effectively address the region's growth and transportation challenges."

Critics contend the RTA hasn't provided strong enough oversight of the CTA, Metra and Pace. They also blame it for a decline in public transit ridership from 700 million trips in 1983 to 652

million trips in 2011.

"We've given (the RTA) more teeth to do what they need to do, but I don't think they've accomplished what they should have," Link said. "This (merger) is one of the ways we can make it better for everybody."

A civic group, Metropolis Strategies, began calling last year for an end to the RTA and the merger of the agencies. Its campaign was spearheaded by the group's president and CEO, George Ranney, who is credited with being the architect of the RTA when it was created nearly 40 years ago.

Another goal, Link said, would be to reduce the cost of governance. He estimates a merger would save \$10 million a year "but not cost the taxpayers of Illinois a dime."

The agencies are similar in many ways, and frequently collaborate and share research.

The RTA has a staff of about 119, and its 2013 budget is \$32.9 million; CMAP's workforce is 102 with a \$15.7 million budget for 2013, according to the agencies.

The RTA is the umbrella agency overseeing public transportation in northeastern Illinois. It was created in 1974 with approval of a referendum proposal in the six-county region, but has evolved over the decades.

Amendments to the RTA Act in 1983 and again in 2008 substantially changed the agency's organization, funding and operations and boosted its oversight of the CTA, Metra and Pace.

CMAP is a relatively new and low-profile agency. It was formed in 2005 when the legislature merged the Chicago Area Transportation Study and the Northeastern Illinois Planning Commission.

The RTA has a 16-member board appointed by political leaders from each of the six counties. Five members are appointed by the mayor of Chicago.

In a statement Friday, RTA Executive Director Joe Costello said the merger bill "does not change any of the RTA's responsibilities and will not improve mass transit."

CMAP's 15-member board is appointed by political leaders from seven counties. CMAP's board has discussed the idea of merging with the RTA but has not taken a position on the proposal.

The board, a spokesman said, believes "we need to take a regional approach to funding and (the) provision of transit services."