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# Talk of RTA, CMAP merger draws mixed reviews

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Will commuters benefit from merging the Regional Transit Authority with the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning? State Sen. Terry Link of Waukegan is pushing for the merger.

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By Mami Pyke

Will SB 1594 seeking to combine CMAP and RTA pass the General Assembly or is it DOA?

Sorry. Got a little acronym-heavy. Today's column is about a proposal to merge two of the wonkier agencies in the region — the Regional Transportation Authority and the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning.

A D V E R T

The RTA oversees the Chicago Transit Authority, Metra and Pace, while CMAP is in charge of planning for northeastern Illinois — guiding strategy for housing, transportation, economic development and open space in 284 communities.

Combining the two would save money and streamline decision-making, thinks Sen. Terry Link, a Waukegan Democrat, who is sponsoring the merger legislation.

Senate Bill 1594 would marry the two in order to "eliminate unnecessary and duplicative functions and provide the most cost-effective means to ensure that transit services are fast, well-planned,

### Words to the wise

With bad weather expected this week, AAA has a few quick tips. Before heading out in a storm, remove snow from your entire vehicle so it doesn't obscure your view or that of others. Keep the gas tank at least half full. Be wary of icy surfaces on bridges. Don't cut in front of trucks when changing lanes. Apply firm, consistent pressure to your anti-lock brakes.

coordinated ... etc.," the bill reads.

Governing the revamped superagency would be a board of 18, appointed by a mix of county board chairmen, the mayor of Chicago and the governor. Board members would not be paid; currently RTA directors get a \$25,000 annual stipend, while CMAP directors are unpaid.

"A lot of people want to serve; they're not just there for the paycheck," Link said. "I'm a huge proponent of consolidating local government and saving the taxpayers money. This could result in \$10 million cost savings."

The new organization also would be charged with doubling transit use in 25 years.

Sounds good. Who would disagree?

Behind the scenes the RTA and CMAP can't be too happy at the prospect of a shotgun wedding and whatever synergies (also known as layoffs) occur. But their official responses were nothing if not diplomatic.

"The RTA is always happy to engage in discussions with legislators about the important work we do every day to ensure our region has access to safe, reliable and efficient public transportation," Executive Director Joe Costello said. But "this proposal does not change any of the RTA's responsibilities and will not improve mass transit."

CMAP Executive Director Randy Blankenhorn says, "There needs to be a conversation about how we provide better transit service and provide more funding for transit. This is one option — I don't think it's the only option."

Cue Metropolis Strategies, a civic group which helped draft the legislation with Link.

"Land use and transportation planning should be done together," said Jim LaBelle, a senior executive at Metropolis and a director on the Metra board.

"Right now, you still have transit planning done at the RTA and the rest of region's planning is done at CMAP. It makes sense to put it all together." Not only does melding the agencies achieve savings in bureaucracy, it will result in policy-making that takes a more holistic view of the region, LaBelle said.

Not so fast, counters Steve Schlickman, a former RTA chief who now heads up University of Illinois at Chicago's Urban Transportation Center.

For starters, the General Assembly did reform the RTA back in 2008, Schlickman told the Daily Herald. Shouldn't senators look at their reforms and see what worked and what didn't before reinventing the wheel? he asked.

"Personally, I don't believe shifting the RTA responsibilities to CMAP will improve regional transit governance. In fact, it may undermine the CMAP existing mission of developing, maintaining and implementing a multidimensional regional plan that includes other key societal elements such as health, education, housing, water resources, etc.," he said.

So there.

Schlickman also pointed out that managing the agendas of the CTA, Pace and Metra — and balancing the needs of the suburbs and Chicago — "is one of the most challenging nonelective jobs in Illinois government."

RTA beatdowns surface every once in a while, but it's proven difficult to kill, even by skilled operators such as House Speaker Mike Madigan, who had the agency in his sights a few years ago.

In a subsequent move in no way related to self-preservation, officials say, the RTA in 2011 hired Madigan's son-in-law Jordan Matyas, who is now chief of staff.

Link is optimistic his legislation has legs and could be debated in committee this March.

"I don't know if the political will is there to move anything at all," Blankenhorn said.

Why not just offer a bill to combine the RTA, CTA, Metra and Pace? I naively asked.

That would be too logical, experts say. In other words, trying to amalgamate the four transit agencies would launch a political war between the city and suburbs for which no one has the stomach.

Link's bill, "accepts the current political realities," LaBelle said.

Stay tuned.

### **Your voice**

Enough of the depressing fatality count on those highway electronic message signs, says reader George Albig of Hoffman Estates. "It's the middle of February and we don't really need this night-and-day reminder that 957 people were killed on Illinois' highways in 2012," Albig wrote. "Possibly we could have something a little cheerier?"

In response, I checked in with Illinois Department of Transportation Secretary Ann Schneider.

Schneider, whose grandmother was killed in a traffic crash, initiated the familiar signs in 2012. "I am thrilled this reader noticed the sign enough to ask (about it)," Schneider said.

She noted that the state's traffic crash fatality rate decreased in the last six months of 2012. Although, IDOT can't draw a direct line between the signs and crash data, the hope is the messages play a role in improving safety. The intent is for "people to notice and think about driving behaviors ... to make sure they're buckled up and not to drive impaired," Schneider said.

### **Gridlock alert**

The signs — they are a changing. Watch out for shoulder and ramp closures on I-290/Route 53 between Thorndale Avenue and Route 12 as IDOT removes and replaces sign panels. Work starts today and runs through Aug. 1. And for a little variety, after April 1, expect overnight lane closures.

### **One more thing**

I can't believe I'm endorsing committee meetings, but here goes. Despite promises of a more open government since a 2010 financial scandal, Metra's board of directors has allowed committees that oversee the budget and personnel to meet behind closed doors for at least a year. So it's a good move that the agency under new Chairman Brad O'Halloran has created four standing committees that will meet in public henceforth.

The committees oversee: audit/finance; capital oversight; employment practices; and executive issues including strategic planning and corporate policies.

Suburban chairmen include Elmhurst's Paul Darley, who is in charge of finance/audit, and former Kane County Board Chairman Mike McCoy of Aurora, who'll run capital oversight.