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04/05/2011

Community Conversation: Mass Transit

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We wanted to talk about mass transit, and so we reached out to a member of the Pace suburban citizens advisory board and a senior planner for the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, a UIC prof whose students design public transit apps, a refugee from Iraq, an environmentalist, an artist, an historian, an activist, a member of the Guardian Angels, and a rapper.

A couple of times a month, we host a lunch conversation built around a topic the Chicago Tribune and RedEye cover frequently. Our co-hosts this week were transportation reporters Jon Hilkevitch and Tracy Swartz. The goal: A discussion about transit-related ideas.

Only a group this diverse could have produced the sparks that it did, or the common themes that emerged – that we are at a key moment for public transportation in Chicago, that mass transit is a key ingredient in the growth of communities, and that there are enticing things that might be done, but aren't yet.

For a look at the names of our visitors, a flavor for what they said and a musical performance that will tug your Chicago heartstrings, join us after the jump:

Mike Fuentes has been a Guardian Angel for 23 years, and while he's often protected people on public transportation, he says he rarely gets to meet the people who make decisions about how the system will work. But he has a clear sense of its importance to the community.

Next to him, barber Abdul Muhammad feels the importance of mass transit keenly – he takes the Pace, Metra and CTA every day between Hazel Crest and the barber shop where he works on 79th Street.

Mike Payne is passionate about the [CTA Gray Line project](#), in which the CTA might charge regular fares and lease Metra Electric South Shore trains so that they run more regularly to the Southeast Side.

Artist Joe Baldwin proposed a flatbed mobile garden project that would tour the CTA rail lines – and a "Take Your Car to Work Day" to illustrate the vital role of public transportation by promoting a day (or two?) of gridlock. Tom Kirschbraun of the Metropolitan Planning Council called mass transit the "circulatory system" of a living city, and said as a commercial developer that it was an economic engine.

Adam Kerman of the Pace suburban bus citizens advisory board called for more coordination and efficiencies between Pace, Metra and the CTA. Alyssa Berman-cutler of Uptown United imagined a revitalized Red Line stop at Wilson. Jen Henry of the National Resources Defense Council proposed bus tracker screens in local businesses and bus lanes on Lake Shore Drive. Ryan Erickson of the Center on Halsted said geography was important to the city's gay and lesbian community – and that good public transportation was a key element of that geography.

Tom Murtha of the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning suggested money may be gone for redevelopment, but that information technology could supply the service improvements of the next decade. Beside him were UIC professor Jakob Eriksson, whose students design mass transit mobile apps. "More data!" he cried.

Baghwan Hamdev moved recently from India to Oswego – and brought critical questions about why the region's mass transit options abruptly end where they do. (Hamdev and guest Abdul Muhammad read about the community conversation in the Tribune and asked to come – I'm glad they did.)

Job No. 1 for Iraqi Mutual Aid society Director Ahlam Mahmood is teaching new Iraqi refugees to Chicago how to use the CTA bus and train systems. Activist John Paul Jones said he was "still excited about public transportation," but that it "hasn't tapped the power behind the numbers using it." He was intrigued that Mayor-elect Rahm Emanuel's campaign centered around CTA stops.

Darlene Coleman, a CTA bus driver, has inspired and been inspired by her riders, and is hungry for ways to make service better.

Rapper Psalm One's real name is Cristalle Bowen, she's from Chicago, and one of the songs she feels the most affinity for – Bucket Song – is about how the CTA ties the city together.



"My Bucket Song" by Psalm One from Psalm One on Vimeo.

Thanks for the lunch, all.

– [James Janega](#)

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