

South Side residents look forward to Red Line extension



Elsie McBride, resident of the Altgeld Gardens Homes, is hoping that the Chicago Transit Authority will extend the Red Line train to her Far South Side community.



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Sylvester Benson, who owns a construction company in the Roseland neighborhood, received a notice this month from the [CTA](#) that his building may need to come down to make way for a proposed south extension of the Red Line.

Benson doesn't care — he will gladly move to make way for the \$2.3 billion project that would fill in what activists have called a "transit desert" on the city's Far South Side.

"I've already looked at another place," Benson said. "There's no doubt it will be good for the neighborhood. Anything except murder and robbery is good for Roseland."

Benson's views reflect those of many interviewed up and down the Union Pacific tracks in the Roseland and West Pullman neighborhoods, where the Red Line extension could run. Most residents interviewed say the "L" is badly needed in the economically troubled area, even if it means displacement and years of noisy construction.

"It will be convenient for people who take the bus to take the 'L' instead," said Michelle Mooty-Redding, who was not sure how her home on Wentworth Avenue near the west side of the UP tracks would be affected.

Late last month, the CTA announced it was moving forward on plans for the long-discussed extension of the Red Line from 95th to 130th streets, and was collecting public comments. The only public meeting on the plan will be held at 5:30 p.m. Tuesday at St. John Missionary Baptist Church, 211 E. 115th St.

Public response will be included in the final version of the agency's environmental impact statement, which needs to be completed before the CTA can apply for funding. If all goes as the transit agency hopes, the Red Line could run from Howard Street to 130th as early as 2026, with construction beginning in 2022.

"I'm just sad it's going to take another 10 years," said Andrea Reed, of the Greater Roseland Chamber of Commerce. However, Reed knows the project will take time, and "it is much needed."

The city has not extended an "L" line since the Orange Line opened in 1993. The proposed 5.3-mile Red Line extension would have four new stations near 103rd Street, 111th Street, Michigan Avenue and 116th Street, and 130th Street. Each station would include bus and parking facilities, allowing south suburban commuters at the end of the line to park their cars and ride downtown.

The area has a mix of properties — well-kept homes with flowers in the front sit alongside run-down, vacant buildings with boarded-up windows. Many of the properties are vacant lots, overgrown with weeds.

The agency sent notices to owners of 248 properties that the CTA may need to acquire for the project, including 101 residential and 28 commercial buildings.

The actual number of properties needed depends on where the CTA will lay the rails. It proposes to continue the line along I-57 to 99th Street, then run either east or west of the Union Pacific rail tracks to about 118th Street, and then to 130th west of the South Shore line.

The CTA will announce the preferred option for the extension next year and publish a final environmental impact study in 2018. The agency could then go after federal and local funds, which are tight, noted Jesse Elam, programming director for the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, which has made the Red Line extension a top regional priority.

New legislation passed this summer allows a special taxing district to be created to help pay for the extension. Other possibilities to fund the project are a yet-to-be-passed state capital plan and federal New Starts money, Elam said.

Benson is sure that the CTA will choose the west side of the UP tracks, since most of the homes are on the east side. "I should think it's a no-brainer," said Benson, whose building is on the west side.

Benson's neighbor on the west side of the UP tracks is SouthSide Auto Services on 111th Street. Ginger Potter, who owns the business with her husband, Richard, said she was not sure what to think, since no decision had been made yet by the CTA.

"I have no opinion now, until we find out more," Potter said. "We'd like to stay here, if possible. ... It's difficult to worry about something that's not here yet."

Another building owner who received a letter warning of possible displacement is Ellis Mack, pastor of Now Faith Church of God Holiness on West 114th Street, on the east side of the tracks.

Mack said he would like to take his approximately 100-member church, situated in a converted garage, to a better part of the neighborhood. If he has to move, he wants the CTA to give him a good price because he has worked hard to care for his property.

Mack said crime had grown worse over the past 10 years; most of his parishioners are from the suburbs, he said, and fear coming into the area. "Anything positive would help the neighborhood," said Mack, regarding the "L" extension. "Most people here don't have jobs."

Under federal law, the agency must offer at least fair market value for a property displaced by construction, and pay relocation expenses for owners and renters, said CTA spokeswoman Tammy Chase.

The most striking structure near the proposed "L" extension is the Roseland Pumping Station, built in 1911, which delivers water to nearby neighborhoods and suburbs. The CTA said the station would not be affected — the "L" would run about 9 feet west of the station at its nearest point. The Romanesque Revival-style Mary Magdalene Missionary Baptist Church, built in 1916, on Princeton Avenue also would be spared.

Not everyone supports the extension. Prentiss Smith, 72, a Roseland homeowner, is not close enough to the tracks to be displaced. But Smith fears the "L" will bring more crime and will crack building foundations.

"It's bad for the neighborhood," he said.

Walter Leverett, a deacon at My Holy Rock Missionary Baptist Church at 114th and Wentworth, disagreed. His church did not get a notice of displacement, though it is near the tracks, and Leverett welcomes the expansion.

"If the city wants to make investments, it can only help the community as a whole," Leverett said. "This community needs help."

Among those with the most to gain from the project are residents of the Altgeld Gardens public housing project at the south end of the city, who complain of long waits for buses to carry them to 95th Street and then downtown. An "L" is expected to save residents in the area 20 minutes on the trip to downtown.

Altgeld resident Elsie McBride, 61, said that if Mayor Rahm Emanuel wants to get elected a third time, the "L" extension would help him win over South Side voters, who have been disillusioned by high crime and school closings.

"It would make me feel better about him," McBride said. "He's not doing nothing for us on the South Side. ... Throw us a little bit."

Reed said that the Greater Roseland Chamber of Commerce and other South Side and south suburban groups still want [Metra](#) to look into the costs of turning the Metra Electric District line into a rapid-transit line, with more frequent stops, which would add another transit option for the area. That option could be cheaper than a Red Line extension — a 2009 proposal estimated the cost at \$159 million, including new cars and tracks.

Metra fare hike hearings

The [Regional Transportation Authority](#) and Metra will hold eight joint public hearings in November to hear from customers about their budgets, which for Metra includes a proposed average 5.8 percent fare hike.

All hearings will be from 4 to 7 p.m., with the exception of the final Nov. 30 hearing at RTA headquarters at 175 W. Jackson Blvd. in Chicago, which will be from 4 to 6 p.m.

The first set of hearings are on Wednesday at Homewood Village Hall; Arlington Heights Village Hall; Metra headquarters at 547 W. Jackson Blvd. in Chicago; Clarendon Hills Village Hall; and Mundelein Village Hall.

The second set are on Thursday at the Kane County Government Center in Geneva; the Will County Office Building in Joliet; and the Crystal Lake [City Hall](#).

Iconic Santa Fe sign re-lights

Remember the illuminated 70-foot-long Santa Fe sign that used to sit on top of the Railway Exchange Building at 224 S. Michigan Ave?

Once an iconic part of the Michigan Avenue landscape, the sign was removed in 2012 and acquired by the Illinois Railway Museum in Union, Ill., about 65 miles northwest of Chicago. The museum restored the sign and lit it up again this past weekend.

Other artifacts at the museum include steam and diesel locomotives, electric streetcars and elevated cars and historic passenger and freight cars.

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