

The limited thinking behind the O'Hare-Loop high-speed rail idea

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Mayor Rahm Emanuel is searching — again — for a private firm to develop a “high-speed” rail route from downtown Chicago to O’Hare International Airport. Three things are wrong with that sentence.

“Private firm” is the first. Why would a private business want to compete with a highway system that enjoys lavish public subsidies?

The second error is calling for “high-speed rail,” where trains cruise at 150-220 mph along corridors of 100-400 miles or more. That would be overkill for an airport shuttle route measuring only 19 miles. Business travelers flying into London are just fine with the Heathrow Express trains’ top speed of 100 mph. O’Hare travelers probably would be pleased with the same level of service.

The third part of the mayor’s proposal may be the least appropriate: The proposed trains would shuttle only between O’Hare and Chicago’s central business district.

But why should faster trains be limited to a Loop-O’Hare axis? Why are we planning just a single line instead of a network of rail routes that feed O’Hare from all directions? Granted, the Kennedy Expressway is brutally congested by vehicles shuttling between the airport and the

Loop. And, yes, a faster rail connection from downtown to O'Hare, especially a fast, nonstop route tailored to expense-account travelers willing to spend \$25 on a business-class seat, probably would take many of those private cars, Ubers and taxis off the expressway.

But what about the other expressways and the Illinois Tollway roads leading to O'Hare? They're all jammed with airport traffic too. A fast rail link to downtown will do nothing for airline passengers forced to use a rubber-tire solution to reach all other destinations.

And that's a big problem because the overwhelming majority of travelers arriving at O'Hare are not headed for downtown — or even for destinations in Chicago. They're heading to one of the suburbs.

The numbers tell the story — at least when you can get them. The last time anyone seriously examined where O'Hare's passengers were traveling to and from in the Chicago area was 1988, when the CTA commissioned a study. It showed that only 13.9 percent of O'Hare passengers were headed for the Loop and 21.7 percent for destinations inside the city of Chicago but outside the Loop.

The balance were all coming from or going to the suburbs, including 6.8 percent naming a "suburb near O'Hare," 1.6 naming "Evanston-Wilmette," 7.2 the "North Shore," 16.5 the "northwest suburbs," 11.5 the "west suburbs," 6 the "southwest suburbs" and 3.2 the "south suburbs." The destinations of another 8.2 percent were lumped into the "other" category, mostly northwest Indiana or southeastern Wisconsin.

It's not likely these numbers have changed much since 1988. The Loop is bigger and more attractive today as a business, residential, tourism and meeting location, so its origin/destination numbers may have inched up.

But the suburbs have not withered. Despite the loss of some marquee corporate names to downtown Chicago, the suburbs are still attracting new and expanding businesses — and suburban populations continue to grow. Proximity to O'Hare remains a major criterion for businesses considering office, factory and warehouse space as well as in housing decisions. The whole metropolitan area is growing, and all of it craves faster and easier access to the nation's second-busiest airport. A fast rail shuttle to downtown Chicago simply is not enough to manage airport traffic coming from all points.

Hard questions

So before spending billions of public dollars (or making a long-shot bet that some entrepreneur will invest private dollars) on a "solution" that addresses only one leg of what really is a network problem, let's ask some serious questions about what kind of O'Hare rail access we want to build—and why we want to build it.

1: Where are today's O'Hare passengers starting and ending their trips? The 1988 CTA study is useful, but it's old, and CTA has never updated it. Curiously, the Chicago Department of Aviation has no numbers, and neither does the Chicago Department of Transportation or the

Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP), the official land-use and transportation planning agency for the entire six-county region. It doesn't speak well for our process that the lead actor in the O'Hare drama is promoting an expensive rail link without having first gathered a reliable set of origin/destination figures. Mayor, get those numbers quick.

2: What is the purpose of the proposed rail link? Overcoming highway congestion? Making O'Hare function better? Or is it a move by Chicago to promote the growth of its downtown at the expense of the periphery?

3: Is there a practical way to get Chicago the O'Hare-Loop rail connection it wants without turning its back on the surrounding communities that contribute the bulk of the airport's users?

The answer to that question is yes. The Midwest High Speed Rail Association has a plan called "CrossRail" that would combine existing railroad infrastructure with a mix of technological upgrades and selected new infrastructure to run fast trains into O'Hare from a variety of regional commuter stations as well as from Union Station downtown. When the trains reach O'Hare's perimeter, they would dive into a tunnel and stop directly under the air terminal in a station much like the one the CTA built for its Blue Line trains in 1984.

MHSRA wants to team up the electrified South Shore Railroad and the Metra Electric commuter line, both of which terminate at Millennium Station, and build a branch/extension off their main line at McCormick Place so that airport express trains originated by both carriers can continue on to Union Station — and on to O'Hare.

But those trains would not end their runs at O'Hare. They would exit the terminal tunnel at the southwest corner of the airport, join the Metra Milwaukee West line and continue westward to stops at Elgin, Huntley, Marengo, Belvedere and Rockford. All of the track would be electrified and equipped with the federally mandated safety system that allows passenger trains to run at 100 mph.

MHSRA notes that CrossRail would provide the Chicago area with a transportation resource it's never had before — not rapid transit, not commuter rail, not intercity corridor rail, but "regional rail," an express service specifically designed to tie the area more tightly to Chicago's three trophy destinations — downtown, McCormick Place and O'Hare Airport.

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