

# A key transportation priority list just got drafted—and O'Hare express isn't on it

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Greg Hinz on Politics



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The agency that controls the pipeline of federal funds for major road and transit projects here today released its proposed new priority list of what ought to get money between now and 2050, and what's not on the list is almost as interesting as what is.

Included on the priority draft proposed by the staff of the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning are such longtime area goals as building western ground access to O'Hare International Airport, completing reconstruction of the Jane Byrne Interchange just west of downtown, adding service on Metra's BNSF line, and finishing the expansion and modernization of the Chicago Transit Authority's Red Line north branch. But also on the list is the notion of adding new, tolled lanes to portions of the Stevenson and Eisenhower expressways and I-80.

Not on the list, at least for now, are the proposed Illiana Expressway in the south suburbs, Mayor Rahm Emanuel's proposed express train from the Loop to O'Hare, and extension of I-53 north into Lake County. That's consistent with CMAP's preliminary decision to focus limited transportation dollars on well-defined projects that are located within the established metropolitan region, rather than rural, greenfield areas.

Overall, the plan, if adopted by CMAP's board, would govern the use of more than a half trillion dollars that CMAP believes will be available to spend on transportation capital work in the metropolitan area over the next three-plus decades.

"We're using established facts to determine what the most meritorious projects are," CMAP Executive Director Joe Szabo said in a briefing with reporters. With funding increasingly tight at both the state and federal levels, "we don't get to just make up numbers. We don't get to phone it in."

The transit projects likely will draw the most notice as CMAP prepares to roll out its wider "On To 2050" master plan for development of the metro area.

What's on that particular list has been extremely controversial at times, with then-Gov. Pat Quinn's administration engaging in hardball lobbying several years ago to reverse a staff recommendation to drop the Illiana from the list. Quinn won that fight, but work on the project has stalled and it has lost a key environmental approval. Neither Gov. Bruce Rauner nor Democratic gubernatorial nominee J.B. Pritzker has invested much political capital in trying to revive the project.

Among other projects that made the latest shortlist (it starts on Page 58 of the linked CMAP report) are rebuilding the I-90/I-290/Route 53 intersection near Woodfield Mall, improvement of arterial streets leading to O'Hare, rebuilding and expanding parts of the CTA's Blue Line, funding the 75th Street Create freight-rail decongestion plan, extending the CTA's Red Line south to 130th Street, building a bus rapid-transit line in the south suburbs, and a series of improvements on Metra's UP and Milwaukee lines.

And the proposal seeks to give a new push to plans stalled in Springfield to add toll lanes not only to the Stevenson, but on portions of I-80 and the Eisenhower.

"We're considering a 30-year time frame," Szabo said, suggesting that the political tides could change with time.

The reason is that despite some talk from President Donald Trump, there's no real sign that a big increase in federal transit funds is coming from Washington anytime soon. That means the region will have to rely more on its own resources, including tolls, higher taxes on motorized vehicles, expanding the sales tax to cover more services, and "value capture" of property taxes along improved lines, as was done with the Red Line north. The CMAP plan calls for all of those to reach the \$517 billion needed to implement its plan.

Szabo hinted the O'Hare express train could fare better with CMAP once officials have a better idea of what it would cost riders, and who it might serve. He noted that, so far, Emanuel is talking about paying for the potentially multibillion-dollar project with private investment funds.

As with the Route 53 extension and the Illiana, "this is about making better use of limited infrastructure (funds). . . . This is the most effective strategy."