


Why CMAP Was Wise to Keep the O'Hare Express Off Its Priority Projects List

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Crain's columnist Joe Cahill has been a tireless cheerleader for Mayor Rahm Emanuel's dream of upscale express service to O'Hare. Back in February 2017 Cahill first made the argument that Chicago won't be able to maintain its status as a world-class city unless it offers business travelers and well-heeled visitors a seamless connection from the airport to the Loop. At the time he cited Toronto's Union Pearson Express, with its \$20 U.S. ticket price, as a North American best practice. In reality, that line's ridership was dismal until the fare was cut to \$9 U.S. shortly after Cahill's op-ed was published.

On Friday Cahill voiced his disappointment with the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, whose approval is required for federal funding of local transportation projects, for leaving the O'Hare Express off its proposed list of priority projects, released on April 9. The CMAP board will likely vote to approve the projects in October.

"Chicago offers visitors a choice between an 'L' ride that might make the trip in 40 minutes on a good day and a cab ride of an hour or more," Cahill writes. "That won't cut it in the 21st century, and Mayor Rahm Emanuel knows it. That's why he has proposed a privately financed express train that would carry passengers between the Loop and O'Hare in 20 minutes."

Urban planner Daniel Kay Hertz has previously pointed out the issues with this logic. The current Blue Line renovation project could shave up to five minutes off the trip from O'Hare to the Loop. Moreover, the Blue Line runs every four to ten minutes, while the airport express would likely run at 15-minute intervals and drop passengers off in the West Loop, farther from Michigan Avenue hotels, and without the flexibility of getting off the train at several different stations in the Loop proper. As such the express service, which would likely cost at least five times as much as the Blue Line trip from the airport, wouldn't necessarily provide a net timesavings.



Joe Cahill

On top of these issues there's the opportunity cost of devoting so much civic attention to creating a flashy transit service for elites. As the Active Transportation Alliance and UIC faculty members Kate Lowe and Janet Smith have pointed out, the O'Hare Express is already

diverting planning resources from projects that would actually improve transit access for ordinary Chicagoans, such as the south Red Line extension, and strategies to speed up buses or create crosstown rapid transit.

But Cahill is bummed that CMAP didn't include the express on its priority list because this could make it harder for the initiative to win federal grants or go through federal safety approval processes. However, he notes that the agency may add the project to the list once more details are nailed down, such as the primary funding source. The mayor has promised that no taxpayer money will be spent on building and operating service (although aviation chief Ginger Evans has acknowledged that public funds probably will be used to construct the stations.)

Cahill acknowledges that critics question whether the express could turn a profit for private investors. He even notes the failure of the high-priced Toronto rail service, but says he has faith that, unlike in that city, "demand will be strong in Chicago at a price that will generate acceptable returns." However, he provides little evidence why things would be any different here than in The Six.

"But there's no need to speculate," Cahill assures us. "The best test of financial viability and demand will be the willingness of private companies to shoulder the risk."

So if, say, tech mogul and O'Hare Express finalist Elon Musk is chosen by the city to move forward with his highly realistic proposal to dig a new tunnel to the airport and whisk passengers there via so-called "electric sled" technology, and he's willing to so, that's proof that the project will turn a profit?

And in the very, very unlikely scenario that unforeseen complications arise during the digging of that 18-mile tunnel, or that, once the service launches, ridership projections turn out to be overly optimistic, as they were in Toronto, taxpayers won't be on the hook to make up the shortfall?

It would be great to see some evidence of that.