

Joe Cahill On Business Why Chicago's master planners should get behind O'Hare express service

chicagobusiness.com/article/20180413/ISSUE10/180419931/chicago-planning-agency-should-endorse-ohare-loop-express-service
Joe Cahill on
Business



While a local gatekeeper for federal transit funding omitted O'Hare express service from its priority list, the private sector still controls the project's fate. As my colleague Greg Hinz [reported April 9](#), the airport fast train didn't make the cut with staffers at the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, which controls the flow of federal dollars to local highway and transit projects. CMAP's board of directors is expected to vote on the proposals in October.

The directors should pencil in the O'Hare express train. As I've written before, Chicago needs a fast rail connection between O'Hare International Airport and the Loop if it wants to stay competitive as a global business center. International travelers have come to expect a quick trip from airports to central business districts. They get one in London, Hong Kong, Zurich and many of Chicago's other rivals for business investment and jobs. In the U.S., Denver recently opened an airport line, and Washington, D.C., plans to open one by 2020.

Chicago offers visitors a choice between an el ride that might make the trip in 40 minutes on a good day and a cab ride of an hour or more. 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. At an estimated cost of

\$2 billion, it won't be cheap, but a couple of companies—including electric-car pioneer and rocketry mogul Elon Musk—have expressed interest in building and running an express train. Bids are due next month.

We'll see what they come up with, but the stakes keep rising. Express train service would advance the goals of Emanuel's recently unveiled \$8.5 billion terminal expansion project at O'Hare. The expansion is aimed at attracting more international traffic, which would bring more travelers accustomed to airport express service.

With so much riding on a fully modernized airport experience, it was disappointing to see the O'Hare express train excluded from CMAP's priority list. Making the list matters for a couple of reasons—access to federal funding and eligibility to seek certain federal clearances such as safety approvals. Still, it would be a mistake to read too much into the exclusion.

First of all, CMAP did include O'Hare express service in its broader list of projects for the region over the next 30 years, albeit in a lower-priority category alongside such perennial pipe dreams as the crosstown expressway. Second, the list isn't set in stone; projects can be added as circumstances change. CMAP staffers may have concluded they don't yet have enough information to make O'Hare express service a high priority. Projects on the priority list often have detailed demand projections, established funding sources, and may even be in early stages of construction.

An O'Hare express train could jump to CMAP's high-priority list if private investors agree to underwrite the project. And that's what Emanuel has in mind. He has vowed that no public money will be used to build or operate the O'Hare express. Scoff if you like, but private financing is the right approach.

Many question demand for express service between O'Hare and downtown. Skeptics point out that an airport express train in Toronto struggled to attract riders until fares were cut significantly. I think demand will be strong in Chicago at a price that will generate acceptable returns. But there's no need to speculate. The best test of financial viability and demand will be the willingness of private companies to shoulder the risk. And that's exactly what Emanuel's bidding process will determine.

If private capital steps up for O'Hare express service, CMAP will have no reason to keep it off the priority list.