

Changing how we get around metro Chicago — and how we pay for it

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Editorial Board

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What will transportation be like 30 years from now? Will self-driving vehicles be as ubiquitous as stop signs? Will Elon Musk fulfill his dream of mass transit via pneumatic tunnels zooming people to their jobs at 125 mph? Drones as flying taxis? The sky's the limit.

Money, however, has earthly limits. How will Chicago get the cash to reinvent its creaky transportation network in ways that make the city work — and thrive?

In coming years, the need for a new way to pay for transportation needs will become increasingly acute. Governments that oversee the region's roads, expressways and mass transit corridors can't keep up with repairs and maintenance. Gas tax revenue that funds transportation projects has gotten less reliable, in part because of inflation and rising fuel economy.

Many highway and transit projects rely in part on federal money, but Washington's deep in debt — the latest projections put the annual deficit at \$1 trillion by 2020. And Illinois' yearslong financial dysfunction has left mass transit severely underfunded.

The Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning decides which regional projects get whatever federal funding is available between now and 2050, and has released a draft list of those projects. Woven into CMAP's report, however, is fervent call for "homegrown solutions" that create new revenue streams for transportation projects.

"There's no free ride, and you don't get to just invent money," Joseph Szabo, CMAP's executive director, tells us. "The soundest policy is for the users of the system, those reaping the benefits of the system, to be the ones to pay for the cost of maintaining and modernizing the system."

Case in point: Congestion pricing. Included on CMAP's list of priority projects that deserve federal funding is the addition of managed lanes on the Eisenhower and Stevenson expressways and Interstate 80 east of U.S. Route 30. Want to bypass the bottleneck? It will cost a bit more. Money generated by the managed lanes can be channeled into expressway improvements.

The agency says raising the gas tax can be a short-term fix; a better long-term option is a "vehicle miles traveled" tax. Car transponders could log miles driven and then automatically deduct tolls. It's a method we have backed in the past, and one that is gaining traction in other states.

Just as easing roadway gridlock is vital to the region, so is addressing the dearth of transportation options available to South Side neighborhoods wracked by years of neglect and disinvestment.

On CMAP's priority list is the CTA's plan to extend the Red Line from its 95th Street terminus to 130th Street. The extension would connect jobs-starved communities on the Far South Side to jobs downtown, on the North Side and in the suburbs. Another project CMAP touts is a CTA bus rapid transit line that would run from the Red Line's 79th Street station south along Halsted to the Pace Harvey Transportation Center.

Improving transit for the South Side and south suburbs is one way to seed investment in communities that haven't seen economic growth in decades. Better train and bus service can entice retailers, restaurants and businesses to view South Side and south suburban neighborhoods as new markets. As long as the South Side ails, as long as it continues to be defined by murder counts and foreclosure rates, the rest of the region suffers. Improving transit on the South Side isn't the end-all answer, but it has to be part of the fix.

It's easy to take transportation for granted. We hop in our cars or board a bus or train, go from A to B, without much thought to the roads and rail lines that get us there. Eventually, however, those roads and rail lines need overhauls that ensure their reliability and utility years from now. The way we pay for those overhauls needs to change — or we'll end up with a transportation system that gets us nowhere.

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