

CHAPTER EIGHT

Return to Rapid Transit: Mobilizing Chicago's South Side with the Metra Electric

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Introduction

The City of Chicago has one of the largest public transit systems in the country. Its expansive train network is made up of two rail giants: the Chicago Transit Authority (CTA), with its rapid transit “L” trains, and Metra, the commuter rail system. Together, these systems provide access to large swaths of Chicago’s various neighborhoods and suburbs. But not all parts of Chicago feature easy train transport. Disparities in public transportation and questions of equitable access by rail have been a longstanding issue in Chicago, especially in the South Side. Transit advocates have placed particular focus on the Metra Electric (ME) line’s potential to increase rail accessibility in the city’s southernmost region and suburbs.

This chapter seeks to explore the idea of restoring rapid transit service to the ME line through unification with the CTA to improve rail access on Chicago’s South Side. A brief history is provided of rail transit development in the city, with emphasis on the shift of the ME line from a rapid rail to a commuter rail line in the mid-to-late 20th century. After reviewing the line’s development to date, the policy history related to the unification of the ME and CTA, along with the failure of previous unification proposals to gain traction, is analyzed. Finally, the potential benefits of restoration for increasing rail access in the South Side are investigated and scrutinized with respect to how unification barriers can be overcome.

Why the Metra Electric? The Case for Restoring Rapid Transit Service

The State of Rail Today: Imbalances in Public Transportation

Though most parts of Chicago and its neighboring suburbs contain some form of rail transit, not all regions are served equally. Access and quality of transit vary wildly from neighborhood to neighborhood, particularly between the North and South Sides of the city – a discrepancy that leaves entire communities underserved

and thousands of residents facing substantial hurdles to adequate transportation. A unified or restructured ME line could help address such disparities by bringing back rapid transit to areas on the South Side.

One of the most noticeable rail disparities is the difference in number of rapid transit stations between the North and South Sides. Exact delineations for the boundaries of both sides vary by source, though they typically follow the standard divisions set by branches of the Chicago River.¹ The North Side generally encompasses 25 communities by the northern branch, and the South Side encompasses 42 communities south of the river.² These regions contain similar populations of 1.5 and 1.2 million, though the North Side comprises a much smaller area geographically, making it more population-dense.³ One might speculate that the South Side would feature a more robust and interconnected transit system to compensate for its relative sprawl, but the opposite is the case: it contains far fewer train stations and lines than the North Side, leaving many areas unserved by trains. The North Side holds 55 of the CTA's 145 stations, excluding the Loop and northern suburbs; the suburb stops add another 10 stations. In comparison, the South Side has a total of 29 stations.⁴ This division means that while most North Side residents have a large network of trains offering easy access to public transportation, the South Side's relative scarcity leaves many of its residents with limited transit options. Out of the 42 community areas on the South Side, 25 have no CTA train stops at all; a similar absence of stations applies to only 8 community areas on the North Side.

Rapid transit also differs in its reach in certain areas of Chicago. The Red Line, for example, is by far the CTA's most popular line and the only one that traverses the city north to south and vice versa; however, it ends its service on the South Side at 95th Street, nearly 5 miles before Chicago's actual southern boundary at 138th Street. On the North Side, however, the line merges with the Purple Line to extend well past the northernmost part of the city into the suburb of Wilmette.⁵ This 95th Street boundary severely hinders South Siders from accessing rail service, isolating the over 200,000 people who live south of 95th.

In general, South Siders face greater challenges commuting to work, attending school, or accessing healthcare and other essential services than their North Side counterparts because of the limitations in rapid transit – challenges that can exacerbate disparities in income, education, and health outcomes.⁶ Studies have found that transit deserts – regions severely lacking public transportation options while having high-transit-need populations – in Chicago were most prominent in the south

and southwest parts of the city, in often-poor neighborhoods like Englewood and the Far South Side where residents are less likely to own cars and have a higher makeup of older or disabled residents who cannot drive.⁷ The limitations on rail leave South Siders more dependent on buses; but CTA bus service is notoriously slower and less reliable than rail, often doubling the commute time of a comparable train ride.⁸

In the pursuit of more equitable rapid transit access in underserved communities, a restructured ME line therefore presents a promising solution. The South Side lacks the North Side's integrated train system; without the ME, virtually all regions east and south of Martin Luther King Drive and the I-94 Expressway – where the Green and Red Lines end – have no rapid rail service. The ME's restoration could mean bringing fast and efficient rail service to these areas and once again interconnecting them with Chicago's broader transit network. South Siders would be better able to access a wider range of employment, education, and other additional opportunities much more easily within the city; enjoy significant reductions in commute times that can be put towards other endeavors; and benefit from overall social integration and mobility beyond immediate practical considerations. Investment in the ME could also stimulate neighborhood revitalization and community development in the South Side. An enhanced transportation system can provide opportunities for transit-oriented development around stations, increasing population densities and attracting businesses that create walkable communities such as those in the North Side – investments that can create a cycle of growth and development in southern neighborhoods. By restoring the ME to bring rapid rail service to such communities, the Metra initiative becomes more than a gateway to faster transportation: it becomes a tool for fostering socioeconomic change.

Overview of Rail Development in Chicago & History of Metra Electric Line

The history of the development of public transportation in Chicago, particularly of the Metra Electric and its fall as a rapid rail line, is in part responsible for the underdevelopment of the South Side's transportation today. The advent of rail in Chicago traces back to the mid-1800s, when the first commuter and passenger trains coming in and out of the city were built. Commuter rail took off after 1851 with the charter of the Illinois Central Railroad (IC). As the longest commuter railroad in the world at the time, the IC connected Chicago south to Mississippi and west to Nebraska.⁹ In 1856, the IC began to operate local passenger service from downtown at what is now Millennium Station to Hyde Park, about 8 miles south, and over the

next century expanded further into Chicago's south, reaching its now-final stop past the city's southern boundary at University Park.¹⁰

Mass rapid transit only began later in the 19th century, with the founding of the first "L" trains in 1882 and construction of the Loop in 1897.¹¹ "L" service grew substantially during the first half of the 20th century, especially after the creation of the city-owned CTA following financial shortfalls threatening bankruptcy. Through the mid-1900s, the CTA modernized its system – closing underused stations, opening new underground subway stops downtown, replacing streetcars with the CTA buses known today – and expanded primarily into the northern and western parts of Chicago.¹² Though the CTA launched its Red Line in 1969 and brought "L" service for the first time to Chicago's more distant South Side, the line ended far before the IC's terminus.

A major part of why rapid rail service from the "L" system was not extended into Chicago's South Side in the same way as in the North is due to the IC line. First, several components of the IC's infrastructure distinguished the line from its commuter rail counterparts and would eventually set it up for popularity in the future Metra system. As early as 1893, in preparation for the World's Columbian Exposition, the IC put substantial investments into the line: by the time of the fair, the line featured elevated tracks, high-level platforms, multiple-door cars, and new express trains to run faster service. The main branch was also completely grade separated, meaning the entire line had no level crossings with roads, streets, or pedestrian pathways.¹³ By the early 1900s, approximately 300 steam train cars were running on the IC line daily, and by 1926, the line was completely electrified to lessen smoke pollution.¹⁴

The combination of the IC's high-quality infrastructure and sophisticated operating system made the IC one of the most advanced rail systems in the world, allowing it to benefit from high ridership and low operational costs. By the 1940s, the IC was more popular than all other Chicago commuter railroads, and most of its riders traveled within the city itself. Downtown Chicago, Hyde Park, South Shore, and South Chicago were the most common destinations for passengers. In 1946, train schedules show that the IC's South Chicago branch ran trains every 10 minutes during the day and every 20 minutes in the evening; ridership peaked that year at 47 million trips.¹⁵ By running so often, and much more frequently than other commuter rails in Chicago, the IC effectively functioned as a light rail system. The "L" had little reason

to expand in the south because the IC covered the rapid transit market in the region; South Side residents could rely on the IC as a steady form of daily transportation.

An additional rapid transit characteristic of the IC included ticket collection. While commuter rails lines typically employ conductors to check passenger tickets on-board, the IC established an automatic fare collection system in 1966. Most of the line's stations had automatic fare gates, and in the 1970s the IC installed turnstiles similar to those in CTA stations.¹⁶ This infrastructure allowed for faster onboarding of riders and eliminated the need for multiple station agents per train, making the IC run more efficiently. Furthermore, the spacing of the IC's stations in Chicago reflected that of rapid transit systems: in 1979, the stations were approximately every half mile from each other, as opposed to stations in the suburbs which were twice as far apart. Even today, the ME has the highest number of stations of any Metra line, typically spaced between half a mile and one and a half miles apart.¹⁷ Had the 1970s ticketing method been maintained alongside the IC's unique station characteristics, it would have completed the IC's transformation into a true rapid transit system.

Unfortunately, the post-war suburban growth and increasing prevalence of automobiles undermined rail systems across the country. The IC and CTA trains suffered similar fates, as decreasing ridership levels began affecting the agencies' economic stability. In response, the Illinois General Assembly created the Regional Transportation Authority (RTA) in 1974 to serve as the governing finance body for public transportation in Illinois.¹⁸ Efforts to help the IC were insufficient, however. By 1976, IC service had fallen to every 30 minutes during the day, and hourly in the evenings. IC passenger numbers were further compromised by the Red Line's opening in 1969, as the IC began losing riders to the more frequent CTA trains: a trend that demonstrated a clear desire from South Siders for rapid transit. Because the IC line was not yet subsidized while the CTA had been under public ownership for decades, the Red Line could afford to offer greater off-peak service, lower fare rates, and full integration with CTA buses, rendering it a more desirable option for many South Siders.¹⁹ Caught in a vicious cycle of lower revenue requiring operational cuts, the IC increased fares while reducing services, a combination that brought still lower ridership. The IC went back to checking tickets on-board in 1981 due to budget constraints, as using conductors was cheaper than maintaining the automatic fare system at the time.²⁰

In 1984, the RTA created "Metra," short for Metropolitan Rail, to oversee commuter trains in Illinois under one unified system. The IC tried to keep pace, but

as a private company now competing against other government-owned or subsidized rail companies, it was not sustainable as a standalone railway. The IC sold the line to Metra for \$28 million in 1987, officially becoming the ME. By then, service had fallen to every hour Monday through Saturday and every two hours on Sundays outside rush hour service, marking the end of the line's rapid transit days.

Timeline of the Unification Movement

The glory days and the success of the ME in its heyday serve as evidence of its potential to solve the transportation problems in Chicago of today, and there have been multiple historical projects that aimed at this solution. The concept of unifying the ME line with the CTA to restore rapid rail service is not a recent innovation; for decades, such unification has been the subject of numerous proposals and initiatives advanced by various stakeholders, ranging from local community advocates to Illinois lawmakers. A long history of unification demands and recurring policy themes form a backdrop to a comprehensive understanding of the specific transportation needs and aspirations of Chicago residents and rail advocates. Recognizing these commonalities across time enables the design of targeted policy solutions that align most closely with the articulated demands.

One of the first unification movements to gain traction began nearly 30 years ago. Mike Payne, a South Side local and rail advocate, launched his “Gray Line” proposal in 1996, outlining a plan to convert the ME from a commuter rail line to a CTA-style “L” rapid transit system.²¹ The initiative centers around the idea of utilizing the existing ME line and infrastructure to create rapid service in the South by running the trains more frequently – every 10 to 15 minutes instead of hourly – like an “L” train. The “Gray Line” appellation draws from the CTA's color-coded rail system, and the plan involves a full integration of the ME line with the CTA.²² In line with this vision, schedules and fares of the two systems would be integrated, and turnstiles and fareboxes would be installed at ME stations to mirror CTA infrastructure. Payne's other proposed modifications are to the railcars themselves, including eliminating the bathroom inside each ME car to create more vestibule space, redesigning the seats to avoid wear, and removing indoor vestibule doors to facilitate rider distribution. These changes would eliminate the need for conductors to collect tickets after boarding, allowing for easier boarding and facilitating transfers from other CTA lines without paying additional fares.²³ Payne's proposal envisions changes for the South Chicago branch and part of the University Park branch of the ME line, which would bring

rapid transit all the way down to 93rd Street and 115th Street, in the South Chicago and Pullman neighborhoods.²⁴ These regions are currently not serviced by CTA trains.²⁵

In 2002, Payne's Gray Line proposal was featured in the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP)'s "Shared Path 2030" list of 300 projects for improving public transit in the city.²⁶ The following year, it was ranked first among other transit projects in a study by the Chicagoland Transportation and Air Quality Commission. Nonetheless, the Gray Line was ultimately rejected by the CTA, which claimed its proposed Red Line extension would better address transportation needs on the South Side.²⁷

Payne's outcast proposal resurfaced in the Chicago Department of Transportation (CDOT)'s 2012 South Lakefront Corridor Transit Study, created to identify plausible transit improvements in the city's southern region. The proposal was listed under "candidate projects," but was not analyzed further "because of the high cost expected to be associated with conversion" of commuter rail to light rail transit technology.²⁸ The study said the proposal could be worth reexamination in the future, but did not end up making final recommendations for the project.²⁹ Since the study's publication, no new developments regarding the proposal have been announced or posted to the Gray Line website.

Akin to the Gray Line, the "Gold Line" project proposes to transform the ME into a rapid transit service by aligning with the CTA system. The plan originated in 2009, spearheaded by the group Southsiders Organized for Unity and Liberation (SOUL) as talks began about Chicago's candidacy as a host for the 2016 Olympic games.³⁰ The Gold Line project also called for integrating the ME with CTA fares and schedules, running the ME trains more frequently during non-peak hours, and allowing for low-cost transfers with other lines. New train cars and station upgrades were proposed (as with the Gray Line), including faregates and turnstiles; further, a new station was envisioned for 35th Street.³¹ Unlike the Gray Line, the Gold Line project does not call for a complete transfer of the ME to CTA management; rather, the Gold Line would contract with the CTA to provide service. Nor is the entirety of the ME encompassed in the Gold Line proposal: only the ME's South Chicago's branch, going down to 93rd Street, would be converted.³² Still, the proposal expands rapid rail transit deeper into the South Side for communities lacking those services, while making use of existing infrastructure.

Metra rejected SOUL's request for a study to examine the Gold Line's feasibility in 2009, close to when Chicago's bid for the Olympics failed.³³ In 2012, the project was featured in the same South Lakefront Corridor Transit Study that noted the Gray Line plan: the Gold Line was the only proposed project to be closely analyzed by CDOT. After performing a coarse cost-benefit analysis of the plan, however, CDOT recommended not to advance the Gold Line proposal, suggesting instead that it remain "considered in Metra's ongoing strategic planning process" by the department.³⁴

Nonetheless, the campaign for a Gold Line continued. In 2016, the new Coalition for a Modern Metra Electric (CMME) launched its own campaign, effectively reigniting SOUL's proposal. The coalition consists of 14 transit advocates, community groups, and other Chicago organizations pushing for greater transit mobility in the South Side, including the Active Transportation Alliance and Center for Neighborhood Technology.³⁵ CMME marks by far the largest group yet created advocating for the ME's conversion. The coalition's petitions echo the previous requests for integration and increased service frequency, emphasizing the ME's potential for bringing rapid transit to underserved communities.³⁶

The CMME presented its proposal at a Metra board meeting in May 2016, asking for an analysis of the project's operational costs. The meeting ended up "[drawing] the interest of Mayor Rahm Emanuel" and initiated a preliminary evaluation by the RTA.³⁷ Despite this early enthusiasm, there is almost no new media coverage on the CMME proposal after the summer of 2016: the last news report on the campaign listed on the CMME website is an article from 2019.³⁸ No reports after that describe any new developments with regards to the Gold Line or the CMME's proposals.

Metra Electric's Existing Infrastructure

Because of its history with the IC, the ME has (literally) already laid the groundwork for a return to rapid transit. Its current infrastructure makes it ideal for CTA unification or general restructuring; most obvious is the fact that the ME has a much greater reach in Chicago's South Side than the Red Line. Multiple rail projects have been proposed to extend the CTA in the south, most recently with the Red Ahead program. This proposal would extend the Red Line by 5 miles with 4 new stations to reach 130th Street, much closer to the city's southern boundary.³⁹ But the project has been long and arduous – such an extension has been promised for

decades, since the Red Line's opening in 1969. Still in the early stages of planning, it is currently expected to cost over \$2.3 billion and only reach completion by 2029. In contrast, the ME's existing infrastructure already goes past Chicago's border, covering many of the same areas as the proposed Red Ahead extension. Both the extension and the ME would have stops at 107th, 111th, and 115th Street, all within around a mile of each other. The ME also has a stop in Riverdale, where the Red Line extension would terminate, and 12 additional stations to University Park.⁴⁰ A Metra restoration project would thus build upon an existing framework; there would be no need for additional infrastructure by laying down tracks or building new stations, as the Red Line extension would require. The comparative lack of significant construction and associated costs give the ME a faster implementation timeline along with its relative cost-effectiveness: the unification movements have proposed restoration projects with budgets ranging from \$160 million to \$500 million, significantly lower than the multi-billion-dollar Red Line extension.⁴¹

The corridor of the ME's mainline (until 75th Street) and South Chicago branch lies almost all along the lakefront, a desirable route with increasingly popular destinations like the Museum of Science and Industry and the newly built Obama Center and a projected residential growth of 26% by 2050.⁴² This growth anticipates an increase in demand for ME service, which emphasizes the line's potential for rapid transit. Some CTA buses already follow the same or similar routes; the J14 Jeffery Jump, for example, is a relatively new bus line that offers express service closely following the ME's mainline through Hyde Park and its South Chicago branch, all the way to 103rd Street.⁴³ As one of the CTA's busiest bus lines, it demonstrates a need for rapid transit along the ME corridor to the southern parts of the city. A restructured ME could thus provide a faster alternative to residents who rely on the bus service and allow the CTA to reallocate some of the J14 buses to other lines that lack rail alternatives.

The line itself also boasts features that make the ME ideal for running rapid transit service. As the only Metra line to be completely electrified, its trains run faster and quieter compared to diesel-powered locomotives. The ME features a dedicated right-of-way, which means it operates on separate tracks exclusive to passenger trains – it is the only Metra line to not share its tracks with freight trains. This separation increases safety and minimizes the risk of delays due to freight train traffic, ensuring the more consistent and reliable service that characterizes effective rapid transit.⁴⁴ The grade-separated, four-track mainline also gives the ME the unique capacity to add

more cars or run trains more frequently to increase service, and the stations' high-level platforms allow for quick boarding.⁴⁵ Additionally, the ME possesses the most stations and trains of any Metra line, and it is the only line with two downtown stations: Van Buren and Millennium. As mentioned, the line's stations are on average less than a mile apart, like the "L." Such frequent stops allow for wide geographical coverage of destinations. In short, the conversion of the ME line to rapid transit presents a viable and efficient solution to improve transit access on the South Side.⁴⁶

Why Hasn't Restoration Happened? Barriers to Implementation and Overcoming Them

Budgetary Constraints

The biggest obstacle to moving forward with an ME unification or restoration project, at least as cited by the transit agencies, has been budgetary challenges. The most comprehensive, and recent, analysis of this issue has been in the 2012 South Lakefront Corridor Transit Study, in which the CDOT evaluated – and ultimately rejected – the Gold Line proposal. The study found that to implement the proposed changes of increasing service on the existing ME line to match that of CTA rapid transit would entail an estimated capital cost of \$350 million. This figure includes track improvements, station upgrades, fare collection equipment, and purchasing new train cars. An additional \$60 million was estimated for annual operating costs.⁴⁷ The study acknowledged that a “detailed operational simulation... outside the scope of this study” would be necessary to properly “determine the extent of capital and operating costs associated with the Gold Line proposal,” so these numbers are quite speculative.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, these preliminary cost estimates are more than double the \$160 million envisioned by SOUL.⁴⁹

The 2012 study gives indications that it started from a position of highlighting barriers to ME improvements rather than genuinely investigating them. Notably, the study assumes that existing “L” and Metra services would remain unchanged if the Gold Line were implemented. Under this assumption, the study found that around 14,000 weekday riders would use the improved service: an increase from the at-the-time 8,000 daily riders that “does not indicate that the project would have a large impact.”⁵⁰ This assumption, however, not only disregards the operational savings that would come from route consolidation of other trains and buses, but artificially lowers the estimated Gold Line ridership, allowing the study to conclude that the Gold Line would not be economically viable.

The study's estimated \$350 million cost also includes two station improvements that had already been on the Metra's project improvement list (at 59th and 63rd Street), and two other stations that would serve all trains, not just those of the Gold Line (at 18th and 49th Street) – each at \$18 million.⁵¹ Subtracting these costs that are not attributable to the Gold Line from the proposed budget lowers it by \$72 million.

The South Lakefront Corridor Study exclusively used CTA loading standards and ridership to measure the frequency at which ME service should be increased and “to evaluate whether this demand is warranted.”⁵² This tool is once again misleading as it measures existing ridership without accounting for how other schedules would change with the Gold Line; it also ignores the history of the ME/IC's ridership, and how historical figures greatly exceed ridership levels today. Finally, the study fails to make any mention of labor reform and the lowered costs that come from rapid transit's ability to function with fewer crew members than commuter rail. The IC's substantial cut in station agents with the implementation of automatic fare collection and other rapid transit features is a major reason as to why the line was able to run rapid transit service for so many years – consequently, crew reduction has been a serious consideration in talks of ME restoration proposals, and general commuter-to-rapid-transit conversion projects across the country, for decades.⁵³ Therefore, the omission of one of the most important factors in the comparative efficiency of rapid transit systems from the Gold Line's estimated costs raises questions about the CDOT study's sincerity in exploring transit improvements.

Moving forward, addressing budgetary constraints with ME restoration requires conducting a proper study to thoroughly analyze all the discrepancies and omissions listed above. The study should examine existing ridership patterns, taking into account historical data, and perform a detailed operational simulation to accurately estimate ridership and make cost deductions associated with ME restoration. Moreover, a new study should not operate within the confines of assumptions or hold language heavily biased against a restoration proposal as the 2012 Corridor Study does – it must explore scenarios where both the CTA and Metra services are subject to change, recognizing the need for a holistic approach to transit improvement on the South Side.

The RTA and CDOT have so far approached cost-benefit analyses of such improvements with the wrong intentions: public transit is meant to serve people, not seek profit. Improving transit access on the South Side is not merely an expense; it is an investment in the entire region, which can lead to increased economic activity, job

creation, and overall improvements in the quality of life of thousands of residents. The Corridor Study's finding of a "small" estimated ridership increase of 6,000 post-ME renewal, despite being a conservative figure, is not negligible.⁵⁴ Even if accepted as a baseline increase, this number represents the transformation in rail accessibility and connectivity for thousands of South Siders.

CTA-Metra Tensions

Apart from budgetary constraints, interagency tensions between the CTA and Metra can hinder any ME restoration project. Coordination between the two agencies is vital for any efforts to bring rapid rail service to the ME; unfortunately, transit in Chicago has been plagued by competition, not cooperation, for decades.⁵⁵ These tensions reflect the complex interplay of organizational interests, jurisdictional boundaries, and differing priorities that together inhibit the progress of the ME initiative; the strains are connected to the CTA and Metra's governing bodies as well as RTA oversight.

Despite acting as their parent agency, the RTA has very limited authority over the Metra and CTA. The limitation of its power dates to its creation and the subsequent takeover of Metra's operations in the 1980s. The Eno Center for Transportation writes in its 2015 report analyzing transit governance:

With the passage of the 1983 RTA Act, the Chicago region began pioneering a new approach to transit governance. While transit agencies across the country were consolidating, Chicago took a different tack and devolved its system by creating separate agencies, each operating different but related types of transit service, in different geographies of the same region, and with very different constituencies. The idea in theory was to have RTA coordinate among the three agencies, with power to approve budgets, but this has never actually been achieved. Instead, CTA and/or the suburban agencies retain effective veto power over any RTA action. What was intended to be a regional agency has evolved into a battleground between city and suburbs. The CTA views RTA as protecting the suburban service boards, and the suburban service boards see RTA as favoring CTA.⁵⁶

As a result, while the RTA holds fiscal responsibility over the CTA and Metra, it lacks the intended power to coordinate transit in the Chicago region. The two agencies largely operate autonomously, without virtually any decision-making integration, but compete for money from the same funder.⁵⁷ This relationship has left transit service in the city fragmented and disjointed; the current division delineates the CTA as

prioritizing rapid transit in the city and Metra as serving a suburban commuter base. These competing priorities thus make it challenging to align strategies or objectives for ME restoration efforts, since unification or restructuring of the rail system would require reconciling these distinct mandates.

The positioning of the CTA and Metra as competing agencies with competing services has been in place for decades. When the CTA began expanding its rail operations in Chicago's South Side in the late 1960s, it was simultaneously encroaching onto the then-IC's territory. The IC quickly began losing riders, leaving it in the financial state that eventually led to its purchase by Metra. Rather than working together to improve transit access on the South Side, the two agencies remained in competition with each other. In 1982, as the IC was nearing its end, the CTA intensified service with what are now the #6 Jackson Park Express and J14 Jeffery Jump bus lines, bringing further detriment to the IC line – once again ignoring an opportunity to support the IC or work together to improve rail transit.⁵⁸ The lack of coordination to improve rail continues today, and manifests in the immensely difficult process of implementing improvement projects like ME restoration.

Moving forward, any integration of both rail systems would require giving the RTA more authority and taking power *away* from the CTA and Metra to coordinate a restructuring. A significant problem, however, arises in the fact that the agencies have different governing boards: most of the CTA's board is directly appointed by the mayor of Chicago, while Metra's board consists of non-mayoral-appointed representatives from 6 counties in Chicago's metropolitan area.⁵⁹ This distinction helps to solidify the two agencies' differing priorities in the city's transportation landscape. Any attempt to cut into either individual agency's autonomy is seen as an attack on the "rival" governing body and the constituents it represents. Taking power away from the CTA to increase the RTA's authority, for example, means taking power away from the mayor – an action that would likely face strong bureaucratic opposition and lead to funding gridlocks.⁶⁰ The ME line, therefore, situated at the intersection of the agencies' two distinct spheres, becomes a point of contention in terms of operational control. A proposal to transfer a current Metra operation to CTA jurisdiction faces opposition from suburban and other Cook County constituents who see it as an attempt to favor city projects, while a proposal to significantly invest in a current commuter rail line similarly faces opposition from the CTA. The positioning of the CTA and Metra as against one another – coupled with the divergent political interests that control them and the lack of a strong enough RTA to override

interagency tensions – means that there is little incentive to cooperate with investing in transit projects, even if such projects would benefit the people of Illinois as a whole.

Evidence of this lack of desire for coordination is seen in the South Lakefront Corridor Study. When examining the possibility of restoring rapid service to the ME line, the study concluded that even if the demanded changes were implemented, “a share of the ridership would come from existing CTA services that might not be able to be substantially reduced or terminated.”⁶¹ With this framing, the CTA sees the Metra line as competition: it has no incentive to help rehabilitate the ME line or “feed it” passengers if such a divergence is seen as a personal loss to the agency.

An earlier report that briefly looked into ME restoration was the 2009 Red Line Extension Alternatives Analysis Study, conducted by the CTA to examine potential alternatives to the Red Line extension for increasing transit mobility on Chicago’s Far South Side. The study characterized the ME’s restoration to rapid transit as a “no-build alternative,” acknowledging that the line already had 10 stations within the study’s area and would thus require no additional infrastructure.⁶² But it did no further research on the project as a feasible alternative to the Red Line extension or make any mention of the extension’s significantly higher cost. The study ultimately fell short of truly exploring transportation alternatives on the South Side by focusing solely on how the CTA could improve transit service – a reflection of the fact that since the CTA is not required to cooperate with other agencies like Metra, considerations of such coordinated efforts are rarely fully explored.

The interagency territorial war has been perpetuated directly by Chicago government officials. At a 2022 meeting of the Cook County Board of Commissioners Transportation Committee, multiple county leaders gathered to propose an integration of fares between the Metra and CTA systems to facilitate transfers for transit riders, particularly those on the South Side. Then-mayor Lori Lightfoot responded to the proposal: “Taking ridership from the CTA and giving it to Metra doesn’t make any sense to me.”⁶³ Concerns like these are examples of the shortsighted perspectives that hinder the development of meaningful transit improvements and keep projects like ME restoration in gridlock. Public transit exists to serve local residents and communities, not the other way around; the primary goal of transit leaders and politicians should be to serve the public, rather than prioritize the preservation of the status quo. When a project promises to enhance the lives of underserved communities, as ME rehabilitation does with the South Side,

transportation networks should at least be open to adapting to the evolving needs of their constituents. In this case, prioritizing people means recognizing the urgent need for improved transit in underserved areas and setting aside bureaucratic disagreements. The concerns expressed about the “loss” of CTA ridership to the ME should be viewed through the lens of people-centric transit policy, not one of system-by-system profit.

Despite these interagency tensions, the ME line is not a lost cause. Overcoming these barriers and achieving rail restoration represents a transformative goal for transit in Chicago, and steps have already been taken to indicate that such efforts can succeed. One of the major requests from unification organizers – fare integration between CTA and Metra – has been partially addressed by the transit agencies with the introduction of Ventra, an electronic fare payment system, in 2015. Before then, the CTA and Metra had very disjointed fare systems with individual payment methods; the Ventra mobile app now allows customers to pay for rides on both transit systems.⁶⁴ The system does not fulfill all the demands organizers sought for better transit integration – Metra does not utilize the physical Ventra cards like CTA, and the app does not allow for free transfers – but it does represent a step in the right direction by simplifying fare payment and allowing for a more seamless transition between the two agencies.⁶⁵ The app’s introduction not only reflects a response to public demand for a more integrated transit system, but demonstrates that interagency coordination is possible, marking a potential first step in working towards a more substantial integrated fare system in the future.

Importantly, the idea of restoring rapid service to the ME has garnered support from a diverse array of stakeholders over the years, creating a base of community organizers, university and business interests, and even politicians. This wide-ranging backing reflects a multi-stakeholder approach that both brings diverse perspectives to how to approach the project and demonstrates that the call for greater South Side transit access comes from multiple voices. Community organizers – such as Mike Payne and SOUL – have spearheaded the unification movement from the beginning with grassroots advocacy. By being deeply rooted in the South Side neighborhoods, they have brought to their campaigns recognition of the profound impacts that improved transit access can have on underserved communities.⁶⁶ University and business interests have also held significant stakes in the ME restoration movement: members of the University of Chicago have advocated for improved transit access to enhance student mobility from Hyde Park, and businesses see the potential for

economic development and increased foot traffic around ME stations.⁶⁷ This support adds a critical economic/educational dimension to the cause that can help convince the transit agencies of the project's economic viability.⁶⁸

Political support for ME unification has also been evident at various levels of government, which is crucial for overcoming agency hesitancy and building momentum towards concrete action. In 2019, Illinois State Representative Marcus Evans Jr. introduced a bill that would lower ME fares and set them equal to the CTA at \$2.50 in an effort to improve transit access in Chicago's South Side. The bill received support from CMME leaders, who saw it as a step towards expanding affordable rail service on the ME.⁶⁹ Though the bill itself never moved forward, a similar concept was adopted in 2021 with the Fair Transit South Cook pilot program, which lowered fare rates on the ME and Rock Island Metra lines to \$2 through 2023. The program – targeting regions on Chicago's South Side and southern suburbs – received support from the Cook County Board, county commissioners, and other local elected officials, in addition to CMME members.⁷⁰ Like the previous bill, this initiative reflects a commitment to address transit disparities on the South Side through an affordable fare structure and aligns with the broader goals of ME restoration. Support from city and state officials echoes that of transit advocates; partnerships between both groups highlight the potential for collaboration while bringing political leverage that can elevate the ability to enact concrete policy changes that support ME restoration. Ultimately, the collective power of these various perspectives ensures that the project is driven by a deep understanding of the importance of adequate transit and underscores the promise of ME restoration efforts eventually coming to fruition.

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