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July 19, 2024

Commissioner Tom Carney
Chicago Department of Transportation

Secretary Omer Osman
Illinois Department of Transportation

Re: Bus Priority in North DuSable Lake Shore Drive (NDLSD) rebuild

Dear Commissioner Carney and Secretary Osman:

Thank you for your support for public transportation and partnership with CTA, Metra, Pace, and RTA to build a faster and more reliable transit system for all Chicagoans who rely on it. We are excited to work with you on major projects of regional significance to ensure that transit remains a healthy backbone of our regional transportation network in Northeast Illinois.

We were recently briefed on the status of the NDLSD rebuild project, a monumental opportunity for our lakefront and the region. We have a once-in-50-years opportunity to redesign this corridor to serve all the region's residents and not just drivers. We must seize this moment to prioritize the tens of thousands of daily bus riders who make this one of the most heavily used transit corridors in the entire RTA system.

We recommend that you narrow down the list of alternatives from five to two and advance the planning process forward with the Flex (3+1 Managed Lane) and the Exchange (3+1 Bus Only Lane) options. Both alternatives provide at least one transit-priority lane, which is essential to not only ease congestion for all users of the corridor but to meet critical climate goals for the region and state.

The 69,000 daily bus riders on 3,300 CTA bus trips deserve faster and more reliable service that can grow ridership in the future and serve even more people. The Chicago region and particularly the City of Chicago lag the nation in creating dedicated space for buses. We urge you to incorporate best practice, multimodal bus, and bike priority into the NDLSD corridor, and reject alternatives that will enhance or worsen the status quo.

As the strategic plans of RTA and CDOT highlight, dedicated bus lanes are an efficient and effective way to improve speed and reliability. Buses often carry

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people more reliant upon transit and play a critical role in connecting neighborhoods in areas lacking access to the rail network.

RTA's strategic plan for the regional transit system [Transit is the Answer](#) calls for the agency to "work to advance Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) implementation across the region by funding and supporting corridor planning projects and by advocating for CDOT, the Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT), county departments of transportation and local government agencies to champion bus projects, improve their arterial roadway design, and secure more dedicated space on regional roads."

Additionally, two public speakers engaged the RTA Board to assist in prioritizing bus infrastructure in this project. The RTA Act provides the agency some power and influence in discussions about dedicating lanes for transit use:

Sec. 2.06(a) states: The Authority [RTA] may for the benefit of a Service Board, by ordinance, provide for special lanes for exclusive or special use by public transportation vehicles with regard to any . . . streets . . . in the metropolitan region, notwithstanding any governmental statute, ordinance or regulation to the contrary.

The RTA is eager to work with you, CTA, and the advocates to ensure the final design of the corridor makes meaningful improvements to bus service and improves mobility throughout the area. The RTA is committed to advancing a network of bus priority streets across the region and this requires strong working relationships with roadway agencies like CDOT and IDOT.

We look forward to hearing from you as you address these concerns and continuing to work together to prioritize transit.

Sincerely,



Kirk Dillard
Board Chairman



Leanne Redden
Executive Director



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June 19, 2024

Regional Transit Authority
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Dear Chairman Dillard and members of the Regional Transit Authority (RTA) Board of Directors:

Today, we are here to ask for your vocal support as we fight to head off a potentially short-sighted and harmful decision for our region's transit and quality of life.

The Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT), alongside partners at Chicago Department of Transportation (CDOT), Chicago Transit Authority (CTA), and other public sector stakeholders, have for years been conducting a planning study to determine a path forward on the urgently needed reconstruction of North DuSable Lake Shore Drive (NDLSD).

We have learned that the project team is preparing to announce a preferred design that doubles down on maintaining a highway alongside our treasured lakefront. This determination is moving forward despite a decade of advocacy from dozens of organizations and thousands of residents calling for a more forward-thinking approach to rebuilding NDLSD, one that prioritizes walking, biking, and transit in face of the clarion call for action on climate change.

NDLSD is the highest bus ridership corridor in the city alongside the densest neighborhoods in the city. It presents an ideal opportunity to implement a transformative solution like bus rapid transit. This project holds the potential to reshape our city's transportation landscape for the next century, offering a chance to embrace innovative solutions that will resonate for generations to come.

The last few weeks have seen numerous elected officials leverage their leadership to call for a different solution, including a letter from more than a dozen lake front city council members calling for a halt to the project and resolutions passed by both chambers of the Illinois General Assembly insisting on a different path forward.

We urge the RTA Board to champion the vital need for dedicated transit infrastructure along the lake front. As a pivotal opportunity to reshape our city's transportation landscape, it's imperative that we create dedicated space for reliable, fast, desirable public



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transportation. We must redesign NDLSO – indeed the entirety of DuSable Lake Shore Drive – to prioritize transit.

In many ways, the NDLSO project has brought into focus everything that is broken about our region’s ability to plan a meaningful response to the climate crisis. At the project’s outset over 10 years ago, instead of putting forth a truly visionary set of goals, the project leaders opted for the politically expedient but environmentally disastrous route of maintaining highway capacity despite the clear need to increase mobility options and reduce the number of trips by single occupant vehicles in our region.

And so, due to this short-sighted set of project parameters, the NDLSO project team has been given the wrong problem to solve. By committing to improving conditions for all roadway users, including drivers, the project team has constrained the potential for prioritizing high-quality transit solutions.

Since then, we have been engaged in a public debate that is set on artificial terms where we must hold the needs of drivers as equal to those of people who depend on transit, walking, or biking to move around. This runs counter to our obligation to reduce single occupancy vehicle trips.

It is our moral responsibility to plan for a future where people are encouraged to drive less and use more sustainable alternatives like transit. While the RTA Board’s direct authority over this project may be limited, it’s incumbent upon you, as the public officials entrusted with wielding one of our greatest weapons against the threat of climate change, to push back against this decision.

Because the announcement is imminent, we urge you to take swift and decisive action by weighing in. We implore you, as influential voices within the RTA Board, to seize this moment and champion a bold vision – a future where high-quality transit options flourish along our iconic lakefront corridor.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Amy Rynell". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "A" and a long, sweeping tail.

Amy Rynell
Executive Director

Dear Chair Dillard and RTA Directors,

Since 2020, Better Streets Chicago has been leading advocacy calling for a non-highway alternative for DuSable Lake Shore Drive. We are making these calls in light of the Illinois Department of Transportation's (IDOT) plans to completely rebuild the 7-mile northern section of the DuSable Lake Shore Drive (DLSD). The project is also known as Redefine the Drive. Unfortunately, IDOT and the project team have failed to redefine anything about DLSD or Chicago's lakefront park system. Since the beginning of the community engagement and planning process, the public has made it clear that their priorities are improved and expanded transit, improved pedestrian and cycling facilities, and improved east-west connectivity to the lakefront. None of these priorities are being considered by IDOT.

We are bringing this to your attention, because IDOT is preparing to announce their preferred alternative. Currently, there are five recommended alternatives being considered. All five call for rebuilding DLSD as a highway. Only two of these options include dedicated transit facilities of any kind. Based on IDOT's past rhetoric, we are not confident either of the recommended alternatives with dedicated transit infrastructure will advance as a preferred alternative. Fundamentally, this means IDOT spent over a decade on this project only to decide to maintain the status quo—a waterfront highway through a park. Such a decision flies in the face of public preferences for transit and a non-highway alternative, the city and state's climate goals, and a desire to expand and enhance lakefront parkland.

A lakefront highway is neither popular nor desirable. Contained entirely within the City of Chicago, DLSD does not effectively connect to the rest of the region's highway network, nor does it improve local or regional mobility. Many vehicle trips on DLSD are made by drivers who have access to alternatives they would use—if they were more reliable. According to a 2017 Redefine the Drive community survey, almost 60% of drivers who regularly used DLSD had access to an alternative bus route they didn't use. When asked why they chose not to ride the bus, the top three responses were that bus travel times were inconsistent, the bus traveled too slowly, and buses operated too infrequently to be useful. When asked what would make riding the bus more desirable, 46% of these respondents said consistent travel speeds that were unaffected by traffic.

Transit ridership along the lakefront corridor is very high. There are 17 north and south lakefront bus routes. Collectively, these saw over 107,000 average daily boardings in September 2019. About 65% of this ridership occurred on the north lakefront bus routes. To put this in perspective, if these routes were a CTA 'L' line, they would be the fourth busiest line in the system after the Red, Blue and Brown lines. Using this same model for comparison, just the north lakefront bus routes had just under 70,000 average daily boardings; collectively they would be the fifth busiest 'L' line in the system. In both instances, daily average ridership far exceeds ridership on each Metra line.

Despite the high transit ridership along the lakefront and DLSD corridor, we believe this is the ridership floor. As noted, a large number of drivers would shift to transit if it was more reliable and convenient. This is not just an issue of speed, but also access. All lakefront bus routes terminate in the Loop. This is convenient for riders traveling downtown, but it forces a transfer for any crosstown trip along the lakefront. This adds a travel friction for transit that discourages use. To make matters worse, there are no centralized transfer points to make this easier. On top of this, there are no late-night Owl Service routes along the north or south lakefront; there are also long stretches of express only service patterns that deprive entire neighborhoods of transit access. To put it simply, the lakefront transit network is not optimal by any means, yet it still sees huge ridership. Imagine what's possible!

Redefine the Drive impacts far more than regional transportation networks, however. The choices we make about the future of DLSD will also greatly impact the most important public space in Chicago— the lakefront parks. Chicago innovated the idea of waterfront public greenspace. Sadly, the quality of these spaces is greatly diminished by the highway that cuts through them for their entire length. DLSD is a barrier between the city and its lakefront. And its presence is impossible to escape. In September 2023, Better Streets Chicago organized a citizen led noise pollution study to measure the impact of DLSD traffic noise on the lakefront. We measured noise levels during the Bike the Drive event, when vehicles are banned from DLSD for six hours, and compared these to normal conditions. During Bike the Drive, noise levels along the park were equivalent to a quiet room. With vehicles present, so was noise pollution.

We believe it is vital that the Regional Transit Authority, its board of directors, and staff be made aware of this project. IDOT is about to make a momentous decision that will impact transportation habits and planning decisions for decades to come. It is critical we make the right decision now. Better Streets Chicago believes we must pursue a non-highway alternative. This will improve the city's economic performance, enhance quality of life, expand mobility, reduce congestion, protect our parks, and deliver on our climate and environmental justice goals. We believe the following steps must be taken:

- Halt the Redefine the Drive project.
- Develop a robust public engagement process led by the City of Chicago and its residents.
- Create a comprehensive vision for the lakefront parks and DLSD transportation corridor that centers residents priorities and vision. The engineering should follow this vision.
- Dedicated transit must be guaranteed as part of the project from Day 1.

We are at a critical juncture in Chicago and the region as a whole. We have a narrow window to fundamentally shift out transportation investments away from cars and towards more sustainable and equitable modes like transit, walking, rolling, and biking. We are lucky to be in a position in our region where we can make this choice. We are lucky to have such a strong transit network to build from. We just need to take advantage of the opportunity to do so.

We realize that the RTA cannot single handedly address these concerns. But we want to ensure that this board and RTA staff are aware of this issue and know that it's been a concern for residents and transit users—existing and future. We look forward to continuing to partner with the Regional Transit Authority to develop a better vision of better transit and a better lakefront.

Thank you and sincerely,

Micheál Podgers

Better Streets Chicago