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Northeastern Illinois Public Transit Task Force

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Written & Pubic Testimony of Randall S. Blankenhorn, Executive Director of the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP) to the System Performance Working Group Meeting of the Northeastern Illinois Public Transit Task Force on October 2, 2013

Good afternoon. My name is Randy Blankenhorn and I am the Executive Director of the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP). Thank you for the invitation to speak to you about strengthening and improving the northeastern Illinois public transit system.

CMAP is the official regional planning organization for the northeastern Illinois counties of Cook, DuPage, Kane, Kendall, Lake, McHenry, and Will. CMAP developed and now guides the implementation of [GO TO 2040](#), metropolitan Chicago's first comprehensive regional plan in more than 100 years. To address anticipated population growth of more than 2 million new residents, GO TO 2040 establishes coordinated strategies that help the region's 284 communities address transportation, housing, economic development, open space, the environment, and other quality-of-life issues.

GO TO 2040 emphasizes the importance of public transit and devotes [one](#) of the plan's twelve recommendation areas to it, which outlines a series of implementation actions to increase commitment to public transit. In all, GO TO 2040 highlights [24 implementation action areas](#) specifically about public transit, which are distilled across four distinct focus areas – Regional Mobility, Livable Communities, Efficient Governance, and Human Capital. (A copy of the [Increase Commitment to Public Transit](#) section of GO TO 2040 has been submitted with written testimony.) The plan's recommendations regarding public transit can be summarized as follows:

- 1) **Improve the fiscal health of transit** through strengthening the Regional Transportation Authority's efforts on financial oversight, implementing innovative revenue options, and revising the federal New Starts program to support reinvestment in existing systems.
- 2) **Modernize the region's transit system** by focusing investments on maintenance and modernization, adopting new technologies, implementing traveler information systems, placing a higher emphasis on the user experience when designing transit stations and in vehicle purchases, and establishing more seamless connections between modes.
- 3) **Pursue high-priority projects** like the Chicago Transit Authority (CTA) Red Line South Extension, West Loop Transportation Center, and improvements to the north Red/Purple Lines, select Metra service. This also means extending and expanding bus service that supports local land use planning and infrastructure investment, planning for

transit on highways, and improving evaluation measures and decision-making processes.

- 4) **Conduct supportive land use planning around transit** by aligning funding programs between CMAP, the Illinois Department of Transportation, and RTA for planning and ordinance updates, identifying additional opportunities for transit-oriented development, planning for land use specifically around major transit capital projects and bus rapid transit, and promoting housing affordability near transit.

Northeastern Illinois needs and deserves world-class public transit. Transit plays a key role in increasing mobility and connecting our workers with job opportunities. It helps make our region a desirable and practical destination for people and businesses that value the accessibility provided by our extensive system. Moving forward, achieving modern transit service will only grow in importance as our region competes with other places around the globe for talent and investment.

During the [GO TO 2040 public engagement](#) activities conducted by CMAP in 2009, which reached over 35,000 residents, there was strong public support for transit. In communities that already had transit coverage, participants wanted to preserve their existing service and improve it; in communities with limited transit service, there was strong support for expanding transit to include new areas. With a strong transit system, residents have more choices concerning where they can live and work and how they travel.

CMAP primarily tracks measures that relate to high-level regional planning. However, CMAP does track transit usage and reliability through its [Congestion Management Process](#), since the quality of transit service plays such a large role in moving the region toward its goal, expressed in GO TO 2040, of doubling weekday transit ridership to four million by the year 2040. The data for these measures, which CMAP compiles annually, comes from the service boards. Reliability is currently measured as on-time performance, but these values are difficult to compare between types of service, and they have not been made available at a detailed level (the individual route).

GO TO 2040 measures the region's success in improving the transit system using two indicators: **transit ridership** and **transit access**. Transit ridership is defined as the number of trips served by transit on an average weekday. Transit access is defined as the number of people who live and work within walking distance of transit (defined as a quarter mile from a fixed-route transit stop or station). Together, these two indicators measure both the effectiveness and the coverage of the region's transit system. This simple measure of transit accessibility shows that 69 percent of persons and 76 percent of jobs have transit access. However, it does not account for the quality of the transit service or the presence of vanpools or other non-fixed-route services, and it also does not measure those who drive to transit stations. Work is underway at CMAP to develop a [transit accessibility index](#) that considers service quality as well.

As a part of the GO TO 2040 [major capital projects evaluation](#), CMAP has used prioritization of system and service expansions, maximizing economic development linked to transit, and sustainability performance to help compare the benefits of different projects. For example, CMAP uses economic impact software to translate travel time savings from transportation projects into gains in jobs, wages, or economic output. Projects are then prioritized partly on that basis. While it has not been used as a measure to compare alternative project investments,

CMAP has also examined the increase in value that accrues to land with transit access. In terms of sustainability performance, analysis is done based on air emissions reductions, including greenhouse gas emissions, and impact on natural resources. These measures are currently not tracked over time, but that could be a helpful indicator in future planning.

While GO TO 2040 highlights the need for cost-efficiencies in the transit system, CMAP does not track transit service costs or set performance targets. Rather, the plan details the continual financial challenges facing the transit system that have been caused by insufficient revenues, rapid increases in costs (often above inflation), and a rigid system of formula-based funding allocations. The plan recommends a series of implementation actions for creating more efficient use of scarce transportation dollars. Performance criteria should guide how funds are allocated. [Performance-based funding](#) uses a variety of performance measures to assist in prioritizing and selecting projects for funding. Transportation implementers should prioritize efforts to maintain, enhance, and modernize the existing system. While major transit expansion projects generate a great deal of attention and interest, they are generally not the most effective or efficient ways to make improvements to the region's transit system. Maintenance, modernization, and strategic improvements are more effective, as they capitalize on existing infrastructure.

CMAP has [identified](#) three main issues with transit funding that impact the effectiveness and efficiency of the system:

1. The allocation of the RTA Sales Tax and its related Public Transportation Fund revenues—the backbone of northeast Illinois transit's operations—is statutorily determined and is not linked to Service Board performance or need.
2. The State does not describe how transit projects are included within major capital programs such as Jump Start and Illinois Jobs Now!
3. While the RTA and Service Boards have taken great strides at collecting data on their assets and infrastructure and have begun utilizing it to prepare and evaluate their capital programs, it is too early to determine the extent of its effectiveness since the overall process and tools are still in the development stage.

Reliable investment in transit must be among our highest priorities, and our region quickly runs the risk of losing economic ground relative to our competitors around the world if it does not create a more modern, well-functioning system. GO TO 2040 clearly articulates a need to address more efficient governance among transit agencies in the region. Unfortunately, the existing enabling legislation has created an inefficient system of governance. This system has been constructed to protect and defend existing resources rather than assess what investments are best for the overall metropolitan region.

In closing, a top priority of GO TO 2040 is to maintain and operate the existing transportation system, and transit is no exception. The region's transit infrastructure represents a \$36 billion investment, and protecting this investment is a high priority. GO TO 2040 emphasizes that all levels of government should seek to coordinate policies and investments to increase efficiency and produce more effective local and regional outcomes. The goal is to move the system toward a "state of good repair," the point at which all transit facilities are in good condition and there is no backlog of capital maintenance. The transit operators, including the CTA, Metra, and Pace, as well as the RTA, should also make a concerted and unified effort to control costs and

improve service efficiency. GO TO 2040 calls for strengthening RTA efforts on financial oversight and that the RTA, in collaboration with the service boards, should focus its efforts on addressing the system's fiscal health, including increasing efficiencies and limiting cost increases moving forward.

Strategic investment is especially pertinent in the transportation sector given the critical role of a well-maintained, modern transportation system in supporting and furthering metropolitan Chicago's position as a global transportation hub and the economic engine of the state and the Midwest.

Thank you for the opportunity to address the Working Group.