

Metra taking fresh look at Union Station

Metra is organizing a task force of decision-makers involved at Union Station to look at all possible ways to more effectively manage crowds and communicate with our riders.

The action comes after the events at Union Station on Monday, Jan. 9, when an Amtrak signal problem resulted in lengthy delays on the BNSF, SouthWest Service and Heritage Corridor lines. Riders have asked us to do a better job with crowd control and communications when such delays happen.

In addition to Metra, the task force will include Amtrak, which owns the station; Jones Lang LaSalle, which manages it for Amtrak; and BNSF Railway, which owns and operates the BNSF line under a purchase-of-service agreement with Metra.

The challenge is this: in rush hour, even a small delay can quickly escalate into a major problem. Thousands of passengers are pouring into the station from numerous entrances, and the rapid flow combined with the small waiting areas near the platforms can very quickly create overcrowded conditions. That is especially true on the south concourse, where the BNSF hauls more passengers than the three lines on the north
(See *CUS on Page 2*)

CLIFF NOTES

Meeting capital needs will be next challenge

During the coming months, we at Metra are going to be talking a great deal about our capital needs and something called the “State of Good Repair.” We



Alex Clifford
Metra CEO

also will be prioritizing all of our infrastructure needs and highlighting the fact that we do not have nearly enough capital money to address them.

dress them.

We know we just implemented a large fare increase. But the money generated by fares is part of our operating budget, which pays for the day-to-day costs of running the railroad. That budget also is funded by a regional transportation sales tax and revenues from non-farebox areas, such as advertising. We had to raise fares because sales tax receipts have lagged while our expenses, particularly for diesel fuel, insurance and the cost to comply with new federal regulations, have increased.

By contrast, the capital budget pays for the rehabilitation, replacement and expansion of our infrastructure, such as tracks, signals, stations, locomotives and passenger cars. That budget



Keeping up with infrastructure improvements, such as last year’s replacement of the Milwaukee North Line bridge over Golf Road, will be difficult without greater funding for our capital budget.

is funded primarily by federal and state sources, and, thanks to financial problems in Washington and Springfield, there is not enough money available to meet our infrastructure needs.

As a result, we are focusing our limited federal and state dollars on achieving and maintaining the system in a state of good repair. New rail lines, line extensions, new station stops and more frequent service will probably be put off some time into the future.

What does “state of good repair” mean? Here is how the

Federal Transit Administration defines it: “An asset or system is in a state of good repair when no backlog of capital needs exists – hence, all asset life cycle investment needs (e.g., preventative maintenance and rehabilitation) have been addressed and no capital asset exceeds its useful life.”

We estimate we have a backlog of \$3.7 billion in capital needs. The backlog costs are the costs of replacing assets that already are beyond their useful life but are still in service. If you add
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Metra

On the Bi-Level

Published by Metra's Media Relations Department. Send letters, questions or feedback to On the Bi-Level, Metra, 547 W. Jackson, Chicago IL, 60661-5717. Or e-mail onthebilevel@metrarr.com.

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Reminder about new ticket policies

By now Metra's fare increase has gone into effect and riders are familiar with the new rates.

We would like to thank you for your loyalty in these difficult financial times. We would also like to remind riders of several changes to Metra fare policies that also began Feb. 1.

Those include:

- One-way and 10-ride tickets that were bought on or before Nov. 11, 2011, remain valid for travel for a year after the date of purchase, and remain refundable for a year

after the date of purchase.

- One-way and 10-ride tickets purchased from Nov. 12 through Jan. 31, 2012, will be valid for travel only through Feb. 29, 2012, but remain refundable for a year after the date of purchase.

- One-way tickets bought Feb. 1 or later are only valid for 14 days, instead of a year, and they are no longer refundable.

- Ten-ride tickets bought Feb. 1 or later are valid for travel for a year after the date of purchase, but are refundable

only for three months after the date of purchase. In addition, refunds are subject to a \$5 fee per transaction.

- Monthly passes are valid through the end of the month (instead of noon on the first weekday of the following month) and refunds will be subject to a \$5 fee per transaction.

- Link-Up tickets cost \$45 and PlusBus tickets cost \$30.

- Young adult fares on weekends and holidays have been eliminated.



CUS

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concourse combined.

A final note: The city of Chicago, Amtrak, Metra and other entities associated with Union Station currently are drafting a master plan for possible future improvements to the station. Among other goals, that process

is studying ways to address congestion problems in waiting areas and on platforms, as well as ways to address train congestion at the station, which has an impact on pedestrian congestion.

For instance, one idea is take some of the space occupied by unused baggage platforms and use it to widen Metra platforms and create direct access to the street level. The unused mail platform

on the south side also could be used to increase platform capacity.

The next phase of the study will begin more detailed passenger and train modeling in order to determine which potential improvements would be the most effective. That phase is slated to begin later this year. For more information about the master plan, please go to unionstationmp.org.

SOUND OFF

“...the snarky, snotty observations by Metra’s customers about fellow commuters ... offer some of the best free entertainment around.” - SouthtownStar, March 13, 2009

Two aisle views

This is a response to Steve and Jeffrey’s comments in the January issue (about how their preference for the aisle seat is not a seat-hogging strategy). I totally understand what both of them are saying, and I totally agree. The thing is, people will probably just not ask if they can sit next to you. There are two reasons for this, as far as I know. First, people generally don’t want to engage in conversation with random strangers. Similarly, especially if you have a bag in your lap or something, they may feel like they’re annoying you. The bottom line is that people will likely try to find an open aisle seat they can just sit in, instead of making an annoying request to a random person.

Jake

Besides more elbow room, etc., another reason to avoid window seats is the condition of the seat cushion. Permanent depressions in the seat make it uncomfortable to sit there. Maybe I’m too “princess and the pea” about it but I say first come, first choice. I am more than happy to stand up and let someone sink into the window seat.

P.S. It is not a foolproof way to sit alone. Many riders ask to get to the seat. No big deal.

Diane

And there you have it...some riders have a problem asking aisle-sitters for the seat next to them, and some people do not. The important thing for everyone to remember is to be courteous.

Thanks (not)

I’ve seen plenty of riders save the seat next to them for a friend, which is understandable, but



last night during a crowded rush hour, I actually had a selfish guy tell me that he was saving a seat for someone who was getting on at a later stop down the line!

Sick of Self-Centeredness
in Human Beings

It takes a special feeling of entitlement to think such behavior is acceptable, doesn't it?

Thanks (not) again

The train was packed that morning and there was standing room only. I was sitting with my visiting cousins in a four-seater. You sat down next to me and the three of us made as much room as we could for you. Somehow, I dropped my new November monthly AND my CTA U-Pass and could not find them. I was frantically looking around. I politely asked you to stand up for a second so I could look under your seat and you made a silent fuss about it. Then, I had to use the one-way my cousin had just bought when I couldn’t find my pass. When we got off, my pass was right under you. Thanks for being SO helpful and I’m sorry I was such a hassle. Alas, what goes around comes around! And

to the four ladies who started cheering when I found them: I’m glad you ladies cared. Most of the Metra riders I encounter are polite and courteous. It’s a shame the one day I could use help, someone wasn’t willing to give it. P.S. You owe me \$4.50.

Helena

Somehow we doubt he'll pay up.

Thanks (for real)

On the morning of Friday, Sept. 23, 2011, I was riding Metra Electric Train No. 756 to work and unknowingly dropped my checkbook on the train. I want to thank the commuter who returned my checkbook to their local bank. Since I do not know who the person is, I wanted to show my gratitude through “Sound Off.” I am so thankful to know there are some good-hearted and honest people riding the Metra with me!

Sherea

The only thing we'd add is that we know there are more than some good-hearted and honest people on our trains – we know most of you are.

Shelling out

Today, I picked up the January newsletter and read Leanne’s complaint about the avid sunflower-seed-chewer/spitter, and her wondering about what fellow commuters were thinking. Well, I for one would be glad to see that he had the forethought to bring a cup to place his sunflower kernels in. He could have just littered the floor with his seed coverings, and unless he was making a spectacle of himself – chewing with his mouth open comes to mind – why were you so intent on watching his habit? I just hope he took his cup and deposited it in the trash container when he left the train.

Mike

It sounds like your tolerance is a bit higher than Leanne's.

Retiring rider

My dad has ridden Metra for many years to his job into the city. It has been a grueling commute for him but in a few weeks he will be retiring! Over the years, he has brought home copies of “OTBL” and we have quite enjoyed reading it and shared many laughs over the entertaining stories of his fellow commuters. Would love it if you could post this in an upcoming issue to let him know how much I’ve enjoyed sharing this with him. (He knows who he is.) And it’s good to know since I will no longer be receiving copies that I can view the newsletters online!

Happy Retirement Dad!

Erin

We would like to add our congratulations and our thanks for riding Metra.

Winter Travel Notes

Four new businesses at Chicago French Market

The Chicago French Market (131 N. Clinton, Chicago; 312-575-0306) is welcoming four new vendors in 2012. EJ Sushi, a sister restaurant to Kai Sushi, offers sushi from renowned sushi chefs. Wisma, a chain of gourmet food and beer/wine cafés, offers made-from-scratch foods like sauces, dressings, salads, pastas, sandwiches, entrees and even desserts. Another new entry is Superior Nut and Candy, which focuses on freshly roasted nuts, chocolates and yogurt products and popular candies. In February, Klay Oven Kitchen will open, offering more than 25 varieties of fresh Indian spices from cumin, fennel, turmeric and cardamom to black salt, star anise and mustard seeds.

Safety contest entries due March 15

The deadline for Metra's annual Safety Poster and Essay Contest is fast approaching. The contest is open to all K-12 students in Metra's six-county service area. All entries must be submitted by March 15 to be eligible for a prize. This year's theme is: "Lead the Way: Look, Listen, Live." Winning entries will be featured in our annual safety calendar, on Metra tickets and on posters distributed to schools and communities throughout Northeast Illinois. New iPads will go to

each of first-place K-12 poster contest winners and first-place essay contest winners from each grade group, courtesy of the Hubbard Radio Group. Visit our website www.metracontest.com for contest rules and guidelines and to find out how to submit your entry online.

Schedules adjusted on two lines

Starting Jan. 29, Metra made minor schedule adjustments on some trains on the Union Pacific North and Union Pacific West lines, primarily so that the schedules more accurately reflect actual operating conditions. In most cases, a train's departure times from certain stops or its running times between stations or overall were modified by one to five minutes. Some trains have slightly earlier departure times. The schedules were adjusted to make them more accurate and/or to minimize conflicts with other trains. The schedules of some weekend trains also were adjusted, and all weekend trains on both lines were renumbered to make them consistent and differentiate them from weekday trains. The biggest change was to the schedule for UPN Train No. 367. That train's number changed to 835 on Saturdays and it will depart 25 minutes later than its former Saturday schedule. Many riders had requested a later departure to allow them to attend various downtown events. Some weekend UP Northwest train numbers also changed, although their schedules did not.

Capital

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\$1.7 billion in replacement costs (the costs of replacing assets that have not yet but soon will reach the end of their useful life) and nearly \$2 billion in capital maintenance costs (the costs of keeping assets in a state of good repair) then our total capital needs from 2010 to 2019 amount to about \$7.4 billion.

Even under the most optimistic of estimates, we will fall far short of receiving that amount – perhaps \$5 billion short. Shortages will force us to continue to defer maintenance until we can afford to pay for it. Deferred maintenance and its associated costs compound year after year. Whatever we couldn't afford to do this year just gets added to what we couldn't afford last year, or the year before, or the year before.

If capital investment is deferred too long:

- Service suffers as components fail to operate reliably.
- Operating expenses increase as trains are delayed and crews work longer.
- Operating expenses increase because more crews and longer on-duty times are required to repair components that are failing at a higher rate.
- The poor condition of one component accelerates the wear and tear on other components. For example, track conditions affect the conditions of locomotives and cars, and vice versa.
- As capital investment is deferred even longer, the cycle continues to worsen at an ever-increasing rate.

Keep in mind, I am committed to safety first, so our first dollar will always be invested in safety.

However, achieving and then maintaining a state of good repair will be very difficult. Our challenge will be to do the best we can given the limited resources available to us, and to work hard

to grow the amount of resources available from state and federal transit funding. We have taken and are taking some concrete steps that will help. First, we have stopped diverting dollars from our capital budget to plug holes in our operating budget. That practice is not sustainable given our huge capital needs.

We also are moving toward a more efficient capital planning and programming process. We are updating our capital asset condition assessment. The next step will be to develop a strategic plan that prioritizes our capital needs in a rational, consistent and equitable manner. While we won't have enough money to do everything, we will attempt to invest funds in a fair and logical way. We'll have more to say about the strategic plan in a future issue.

Also, Metra is working with the RTA, CTA and Pace to advance the region's transit system by establishing a strategic, coordinated means to identify

areas for cost savings and greater efficiency.

Finally, we are working with our representatives in Washington and Springfield to educate them about our needs and solicit their help. We may not be able to secure funds for all our capital needs, but we will do everything we can for Metra's future.

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