

No fare increase in 2011

Metra unveils next year's budget; plan also calls for no service cuts

The Metra Board of Directors has approved the release of the agency's proposed 2011 Program and Budget book for public hearing and comment.

Metra's proposed 2011 budget includes \$634.2 million for operations and a \$407.5 million capital program. No fare increase or cut in service is planned in 2011.

However, lower-than-projected ridership and sales tax receipts coupled with higher insurance and maintenance costs forced Metra to transfer \$35 million from its 2010 capital program and \$25 million from its 2011 capital program to operations for use on preventive maintenance in 2011.

The agency also proposes to continue to delay filling vacancies and to combine job functions to reduce costs in 2011.

The proposed 2011-2015 capital program includes the allocation of \$585 million in State of Illinois bond program proceeds to replace 160 Highliner cars on the Metra Electric District. Those new cars already have been ordered.

State bond proceeds and other capital funding will be allocated in the amount of \$175.8 million to complete a number of station and parking improvements across the Metra system.

Public hearings on Metra's 2011 budget will be held on Nov. 3 and Nov. 4 at locations throughout the six-county region. A list of the dates, times and locations of these hearings can be seen on Page 4.

Copies of the budget are available for review online at www.metrarail.com and are being distributed to municipalities and libraries across the region.

Following the public comment period, the Metra Board will vote on a final budget at its Nov. 12 meeting. The budget will then be forwarded to the Regional Transportation Authority, which will vote on the region's transportation budget in December.

Metra's first female engineer retires

After a 38-year career in railroading, including more than 22 years serving Metra commuters in northeast Illinois, Vallorie O'Neil retired from Metra last month.

She was honored by the Metra Board of Directors at the Oct. 15 board meeting, her last day on the job.

O'Neil, a Steger resident, joined the railroad industry at the age of 18 as a clerk at the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy, one of BNSF's predecessor railroads. She worked as a clerk for several years before entering engineer training. For eight years, O'Neil piloted Burlington Northern freight trains between Chicago and LaCrosse, Wis.

She was hired as a Metra trainman in 1988 and worked several months as a conductor before entering Metra's engineer training program. She retrained to learn commuter operations and made her first solo trip on July 9, 1989, becoming Metra's first female locomotive engineer.

In addition to engine service and conductor, O'Neil also held the following positions at Metra: Assistant Road Foreman and Road Foreman of Engines, Trainmaster and Senior Trainmaster.

Being a woman in a male-dominated profession hasn't presented any real problems for O'Neil. "I managed to gain acceptance from most other crew members and operating personnel rather quickly, and I've generally enjoyed the camaraderie."



Vallorie O'Neil operates a Rock Island train in her last day on the job Oct. 15.

An avid horseback rider, O'Neil is looking forward to continue riding for fun. She also looks to spend more time with family and serve as a motivational speaker and mentor to women in non-traditional jobs.



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.

We can't guarantee all letters will be printed or answered. Please keep letters to less than 200 words and include your first name, hometown and what line you ride. (Names are not required but strongly encouraged.) We reserve the right to edit letter for length and grammar.

Board of Directors

Carole R. Doris
Chairman
DuPage County

Larry A. Huggins
Vice Chairman
Chicago

Jack Schaffer
Treasurer
McHenry County

Arlene J. Mulder
Secretary
Suburban Cook County

James V. Dodge
Director
Suburban Cook County

James C. LaBelle
Director
Lake County

Edward W. Paesel
Director
Suburban Cook County

Jack E. Partelow
Director
Will County

Willis E. Pennington Jr.
Director
Cook County

Caryl J. Van Overmeiren
Director
Kane County

William A. Widmer III
Director
Suburban Cook County

SOUNDING BOARD

Got a question? We've got an answer

Turn on the lights

Why do your conductors (usually, but not always) turn out the lights on the train before leaving Union Station? If it is a safety issue, why does it only happen 80-90 percent of the time? And either way, why do some conductors turn them back on within seconds, while others leave them out (with all the passengers sitting in pitch black conditions) for minutes on end, until we're completely out of the station? It's very irritating to have work/reading interrupted during that time, and it's compounded by the capricious nature of it.

Phil

The conductors don't turn out the lights. When the train is in the station, the lights and other systems are powered by plugging the trains into the electricity at the station. That allows us to idle the engine to save fuel and limit emissions. When they leave, the engine supplies the power. So when the lights go out, it's because we're switching from the plugged-in power to the train. Sometimes that's pretty seamless so you don't notice. Sometimes it takes few moments.

More room for bikes?

Is it possible in the near future that there will be Metra cars

reconfigured to accommodate bicycles plus some seating for those who wish to sit near their bike? It would eliminate all the problems of bikes being crowded with passengers in the handicapped areas and also people could bring them aboard prime inbound-morning, outbound-evening commutes. I realize besides cost there are other potential problems, namely in the downtown terminals, but figure many utilizing this would-be privilege probably will have left a given inbound train before it reaches the Loop in the morning. With traffic more and more out of control, it would give people many other options.

Greg

As you suspect, the problem is money. We are now using every car that we own, so we can't dedicate any exclusively to bikes. We are buying new Highliners for the Metra Electric but that is to replace worn-out cars. We don't have money to buy any extra ones.

Technical help desk

Your latest OTBL mentioned there is no Metra app, but they can use the website. There's another option too: download the PDF of the schedule and e-mail it to yourself, or find an app that lets you save PDFs. Works great for me, and I've helped other passen-

gers too. Thanks for the insight, and tell those conductors to make more regular announcements discouraging seat hoggers! It'd help us hogbusters tremendously.

Jason

A suggestion to Kevin for service advisory notifications: you can also receive notifications via Twitter – search for @Metra for the entire system or individual lines. You'll have some control over the time frame and you can send notifications to your cell phone. Standard message rates apply.

Pete

Thanks for the tips.

Santa trains?

Several years ago my kids and I rode the Rock Island Santa train and we enjoyed it. Is there going to be a Santa train this year?

Tom

Metra no longer operates Santa trains. However, many public libraries, park districts and other community agencies and organizations reserve group travel trips on Metra around Christmas so they can hold their own events, primarily "Polar Express" trips. You can check with your local organizations to see if they are planning such an event.

About those quiet cars....

We received a deluge of e-mails after we asked you for your input about the idea of trying out quiet cars on our system. The bottom line is this: we are going to implement a pilot project early next year. We still have to work out the details, and to do that we will rely on the many thoughtful e-mails we received from our

wonderful riders. (We received more than 800 and counting...) Most of you begged for relief from your rude and noisy fellow passengers. Others – a small number – thought it was bad idea for various reasons. We didn't hear from anyone who said they wanted to preserve their right to loudly recite next week's shopping list

or the results of their doctor visit for all to hear, but then again, we didn't expect to. No one fesses up to annoying others, do they? While our survey was hardly scientific, it's clear that quiet cars in some form (in any form, many of you said) would be hugely popular. Stay tuned, we will get back to you shortly (and quietly!).

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

What an answer

I’m reading the responses to Sound Off in the October issue of *On The Bi-Level*. Some of the Sound Offs are crazy, but the responses are normally professional, polite, but firm in putting people in their place. I’ve never said Wow to a response yet. Until TODAY. Who answered your Sound Offs this month? So rude! If I responded to people who wrote in at my job the way this person did, I’d be fired. Something tells me something changed this month and it wasn’t for the better.

Saying someone is from Selfishville? Or the unbelievably long and rude response to the Quiet Car comment, geesh. Whoever responded to these is worse than the people writing in.

And if someone thought these responses were funny? They were wrong. Ugh.

Natalie

We hoped our readers would understand, after reading the reply to the first Sound Off letter, that were going to be less respectful and therefore less boring with our responses last month in response to the gripe that we were being too professional and too polite. Sorry if it was too over the top. As for the quiet car Sounding Board reply – we don’t think it was rude, but if it was it was unintentional. We hope you read the entire response to see that it actually contained some good news – that we are considering (and, in fact, are going to implement) a quiet car test (see Page 2).

Now, speaking of ugh....

What a smell

To the woman across the rail from me: your sandwich smelled



But does it work on answers that stink?

of rotten flesh and I was forced to change compartments. Please save your unfortunate victim for home.

Irene

And we thought cellphone calls were a nuisance...

What a gas

To the guy who feels the need to repeatedly have gas leaks on North Central Service No. 109, you’re not funny. The rest of us all have to sit on a crowded train with a brown cloud emanating from you. Either hold it in or eat a healthier lunch.

Kevin

And we thought stinky sandwiches were a nuisance...

What bad behavior

To Rosalind regarding “seathoggers,” you’re right about those individuals who believe they own the seats for the duration, when their butts are merely squatting. I ride both the UP North AND the full run of the UP

West line all the way to Elburn and I’m nine months pregnant. It’s harder to get in and out of the regular seats, so I try to look for the first-row seat facing each other, or disabled priority seats. I don’t understand how younger-than-40-year-old “men” just sit there and stare at me while I’m looking for a suitable seat. There aren’t any more gentlemen in the world. Now I have found something that makes me feel better about my commute – posting their actions on Facebook. It is a nice release, so I don’t feel I need to write to OTBL every time. And it’s not just seat hoggers, but cellphone loudmouths, incessant texters (if you’re going to do it for an hour, shut off the key-stroke beeping) and people who walk out of the lavatory, leaving the door wide open so we can look in at the toilet! Be warned people! Hell hath no fury...

Rachael

What is it about toilets and bad smells this month?

Say what?

Attention Rock Island commuters! Although you may think that only typical commuters use your line, there is in fact a rider gifted with a supernatural ability among us. She was last spotted on Friday’s train No. 607. This rider has a sixth sense – the ability to sense knees behind her seat, and react emotionally to them before they make contact with her seat back! Although the raw extent of this rider’s abilities are not known, you may be in the presence of this phenomenon of human evolution if you see the following: 1) The rider in front of you scowls and stares at you at random times during your trip, 2) An inflammatory statement is muttered in your direction, along the lines of “Will you PU-LLEEZE get your knees outta my chair?,” and 3) You and your fellow riders are struck with confusion due to a lack of visible contact between the knees in question and the gifted rider’s seat.

If you find yourself in this situation, do not be alarmed! As the human species evolves, we must practice tolerance to those all around us, including those with new superhuman abilities far superior to our own.

Dave

We’ll bet Kevin and Irene over there wish they had similar powers of advance detection.

What a closing

Heard on the Rock Island:
She: “Let me sit by the window and take a nap. I need my beauty sleep.”

He: “This train ain’t going THAT far!”

True story!

Tom

Fall Travel Notes

Amtrak begins Union Station work

Amtrak last month announced a \$40 million project to improve Chicago Union Station, including installing air conditioning in the Great Hall and increasing the number of public restrooms. By next summer, air conditioning will return to the Great Hall more than 40 years after the railroads that previously shared ownership of Union Station abandoned the AC system in the grand waiting area. (Union Station is now owned by an Amtrak subsidiary, the Chicago Union Station Company.) Additional restrooms will be installed on the concourse level. Amtrak is also expanding seating areas for its passengers. All the work is expected to be completed by the end of 2012. Six of Metra's 11 routes use Union Station, and more than 130,000 Metra riders pass through the facility each weekday.

Work to begin on 80th Ave. Station

The Village of Tinley Park has announced that construction on the new 80th Ave. Station on the Rock Island line is expected to begin shortly, with completion anticipated in late spring or early summer of 2012. The existing station will remain in operation during construction of the new facilities, which will be located east of the current building. There will be minimal impact on the availability of parking. The 5,400-square-foot brick station will include a clock tower, full kitchen and Internet café, restrooms, a great hall, a covered drop-off area and veranda, three warming shelters, decorative lighting and a pedestrian underpass.

2011 Budget Public Hearing Schedule

Wednesday, Nov. 3, 2010
4-7 p.m.

McHenry County
Woodstock City Hall
City Council Chambers
121 W. Calhoun St.
Woodstock

Suburban Cook (North)
Arlington Heights
Village Hall
Hanson Room, 3rd Floor
33 S. Arlington Heights Rd
Arlington Heights

Kane County
Geneva City Hall
City Council Chamber
22 S. First St.
Geneva

Suburban Cook (South)
Homewood Village Hall
Village Board Room
2020 Chestnut Road
Homewood

Thursday, Nov. 4, 2010
4-7 p.m.

City of Chicago
Metra
547 W. Jackson Blvd.
13th Floor Board Room
Chicago

DuPage County
Clarendon Hills Village Hall
Village Board Room
1 N. Prospect Avenue
Clarendon Hills

Lake County
Grayslake Village Hall
Village Board Room
10 S. Seymour
Grayslake

Will County
Joliet City Hall
Conference Room #1
150 W. Jefferson Street
Joliet



**National-Louis
University**

- Business/Management
- Health Care Leadership
- Education
- Human Services
- Teacher Preparation
- Psychology
- ...and many others!

Get started this
winter term.

Attend an
Open House
at our
Chicago campus

Wednesday, December 8, 4:00pm—7:00pm
Saturday, December 11, 10:00am—1:00pm

RSVP

call 888.327.4206 or go to
www.nl.edu/openhouse