

To: Illinois Senate Capital Working Group

Subject: Role of Public Transit in Illinois' COVID-19 Response

Date: May 18, 2020

From: Active Transportation Alliance, Center for Neighborhood Technology, Chaddick Institute for Metropolitan Development at DePaul University, Elevated Chicago, Environmental Law & Policy Center, High Speed Rail Alliance, Illinois Environmental Council, Metropolitan Planning Council, Respiratory Health Association

Thank you for your hard work and service during these difficult times. One year after the passage of a capital bill that included historic investment in Illinois' public transit systems, the COVID-19 pandemic has triggered financial and operational crises for public transit agencies across the state.

As representatives of Chicagoland's business, civic, and academic communities, we are committed to advocating for public transit during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. This includes 1) advocating for emergency assistance funding and reform in Springfield and Washington; 2) addressing the needs of essential workers riding and operating public transit to sustain our statewide economy under extraordinary circumstances; and 3) preparing our state's transit systems to be drivers of health and economic resilience during our Illinois' recovery from the pandemic and its fallout.

We recognize this is not a short-term crisis for Illinois transit that will go away when stay-at-home orders are lifted and social distancing guidelines ease. The financial impact will ripple for many months and years, as more Illinoisans continue to work from home and may remain wary of crowded buses and trains.

This crisis forces us to rethink how we view public transit and reevaluate our statewide goals, with racial equity and public health outcomes at the center. Ridership cannot and should not be the primary metric for evaluation. **Transit is a public good that is essential to sustaining and reviving our regional economy – even if far fewer people are riding in the short term.** Low-income Illinoisans who rely on transit to get around during and after this crisis, many of whom are Black and Brown, are providing services everyone depends on.

We need to make strategic decisions now that will enable our region to gradually build back transit and increase public confidence in riding – for our region's long-term economic recovery. Following are recommended actions for your working group and other state legislators.

- *Pursue state legislative changes around operating revenue:* Make changes to state law that would help transit agencies maintain service, including operating revenue flow changes and a temporary suspension or lasting change to the farebox recovery ratio for the Regional Transportation Authority (RTA) in the Chicago region.
- *Encourage public input and notice on service changes:* As operating revenue shortages persist, direct agencies to collect input from riders and the public on any changes to service. Input from low-income Black and Brown riders and residents as well as people with disabilities should be a priority. When cuts are necessary, agencies should inform riders and legislators in advance and develop frameworks any further service adjustments.

- *Review transit capital project plans:* Direct agencies to identify critical capital projects that can be expedited while ridership/traffic is light; consider elevating equitable transit and transit-oriented development; prioritize projects in areas of the state with larger numbers of essential workers and lower income riders (e.g. Chicago's West and South Sides); prioritize equity-focused investments in areas with significant Black/Brown populations; in light of vehicle advancements and long term operational costs, evaluate investment in new diesel-reliant vehicles given state goals to reduce greenhouse emissions and local commitments to electrify all transit buses. Agencies should report on any changes to capital project plans to legislators and the public.
- *Update long-term capital program for public transit:* Direct the RTA and other transit agencies to complete development of a new performance-based planning process for transit capital investments; Direct RTA, CTA, Metra, Pace and other agencies to reprioritize current capital program considering reduced revenues and ridership in a way that is transparent, data-driven, and focused on advancing racial equity. Illinois must avoid political decisions on capital projects in a constrained fiscal environment. RTA should report on performance-based planning progress to legislators and the public.
- *Develop a transparent process to prioritize projects in the Illinois DOT Capital program:* In light of anticipated sharply reduced revenues from Rebuild Illinois capital bill, direct IDOT to develop a transparent prioritization process to define which projects will continue to move ahead. Such a process should prioritize investments that boost equity (benefit Black/Brown communities most affected by COVID-19), improve access to work and other essential destinations, and those that support/connect to multimodal transportation (transit, bike, walk), and those that are most environmentally friendly.