



RIDING INTO THE FUTURE

A Regional Vision for the
Implementation of the Northern
Illinois Transit Authority (NITA) Act

Executive Summary

The passage of the Northern Illinois Transit Authority (NITA) Act presents a massive opportunity for the greater Chicago region. The creation of a dynamic new transit agency, the Northern Illinois Transit Authority, will enable us to greatly increase the caliber of the transit experience in the region and improve Chicago's position as a world-class region. With coordinated oversight, proactive measures, and new agency departments and committees, safety will be improved for riders and transit workers. By increasing access to jobs, healthcare, retail, and recreation, we will set the stage for economic growth and set us up to welcome more residents in the future.

By providing affordable, high-quality, accessible transportation to major regional destinations, equity of the region will be improved. With a reformed governance structure providing increased accountability, the public will be able to understand better which investments we are making, why, and whether we are delivering what was promised. Seamless service and fare integration across CTA, Metra, and Pace will make it easier for riders to traverse the region on transit. Equitable transit-oriented development will mean more places to live, work, and shop near transit. When more people use more sustainable transportation, our region will experience reduced congestion and improved air quality.

The overarching goal of the NITA Act is to make transit the first choice for travel throughout the region by delivering a world-class system. We must take a regionally integrated approach to planning and delivering transit that works for riders, so they choose transit. NITA will focus on delivering service that is reliable, convenient, safe, easy to understand, and enjoyable. As transit works better and more people ride, fares paid into the system will increase, which will provide additional operations funding and strengthen the bottom line. This will increase our region's connectivity and our competitiveness.

To accomplish these goals, we will undoubtedly go through a period of transition and transformation. We will build a new agency capable of effectively implementing the legislation. NITA will be responsible for service planning, budgeting, and capital planning at a regional level. The transit operating agencies (CTA,

Metra, and Pace) will be overseen by NITA and will continue to deliver service to the region. The operating agencies will ultimately implement the regional vision set by NITA. The focus of the new vision will be to make the system rider-centered and improve the ease of travel for all riders making any and all transit trips throughout the region. To make that vision a reality, the NITA Act requires substantial transformation of our current system.

To determine where and when service operates, NITA will develop a regional service plan (see appendix for implementation deadlines). This will be based on analysis of where the numbers of riders and needs are greatest and where buses and trains will help the most people access key destinations throughout the region. NITA will allocate resources to transit operators based on the new regional service standards.

To deliver the most high-quality transit service possible with the resources available, NITA is also empowered through its budgeting and oversight to manage costs. While the new funding authorized by the NITA Act fills the current gap and will allow for service expansion, careful stewardship of resources will be critical to ensure sustainable operations and subsequent operational revenue over the long term.

Bold board and executive leadership is needed to realize the transformational potential of the NITA Act. To elevate our region's system to the world-class transit system that our residents deserve, we need directors who will put in the time, who will ask the hard questions, and who have the entire region's interests at heart. The NITA Act was informed by rigorous research and exploration of alternative models nationally and internationally. Informed in part by the regional transit systems of Munich and Berlin, where regional population density is similar to our region, the NITA Act seeks to improve coordination, efficiency, and service by approaching transit agencies as collaborators instead of competitors. The bottom line is that transit is competing with car travel. We must have stellar leadership to consistently and comprehensively address all the dimensions of a great transit system, as shown in [Figure 1](#).



FIGURE 1: The Principles for High-quality Transit



The NITA Act is a bold investment in the future of transit in Illinois. We have the opportunity to invest our precious public resources in building a world-class system for generations to come. The nation is watching, and we are excited to show them how we transform our transit system to supercharge the future of Northeastern Illinois.

Riding Into the Future

In October 2025, Illinois legislators passed historic legislation that fundamentally transforms our region's transit system. The legislation was drafted to not only address a substantial budget deficit, but to reimagine our system, how it functions, and the service it provides. With the creation of and regional leadership by the new Northern Illinois Transit Authority (NITA) starting June 1, 2026, the Chicago region can build a next-generation transit experience:

- An **extensive, frequent, and comfortable transit network** will improve Chicago's position as a **world-class region** and get visitors and residents where they want to go.
- **Safety** will be improved for riders and transit workers through coordinated oversight, proactive measures and new agency departments and committees.
- **Economic growth** for businesses, workers, and communities will be achieved by improving transit access to jobs, healthcare, retail, and recreation. Enhanced transit will set up the region to welcome more residents in the future and support their sustainable mobility.
- **Equity** of the region will be improved by providing affordable high-quality transportation enabling access to major regional destinations for people of all ages and abilities.
- **Accountability** under a reformed and transparent regional structure will ensure the public understands what investments we are making, why, and whether we are delivering what was promised.
- Seamless **service and fare integration** across CTA, Metra, and Pace will enable riders to easily pay one fare to ride throughout the region
- Equitable transit-oriented development will mean more places to **live, work, and shop near transit**.
- **Reduced congestion and improved air quality** will result from more people using more sustainable transportation.

How did we get here?

Since the Regional Transportation Authority (RTA) was reformed in 1983¹, transit service in the Chicago region has been provided under a model with three transit operating agencies delivering transit service independently. These agencies—Chicago Transit Authority (CTA), Metra, and Pace Suburban Bus (Pace)—have been responsible for their respective transit planning, budgeting, and service, with no integrated regional plan for transit service or capital investment. Although the RTA has had some powers of oversight, the reality has been that it largely functioned to simply pass through funding to the transit agencies according to formulas that were rigidly fixed by statute.

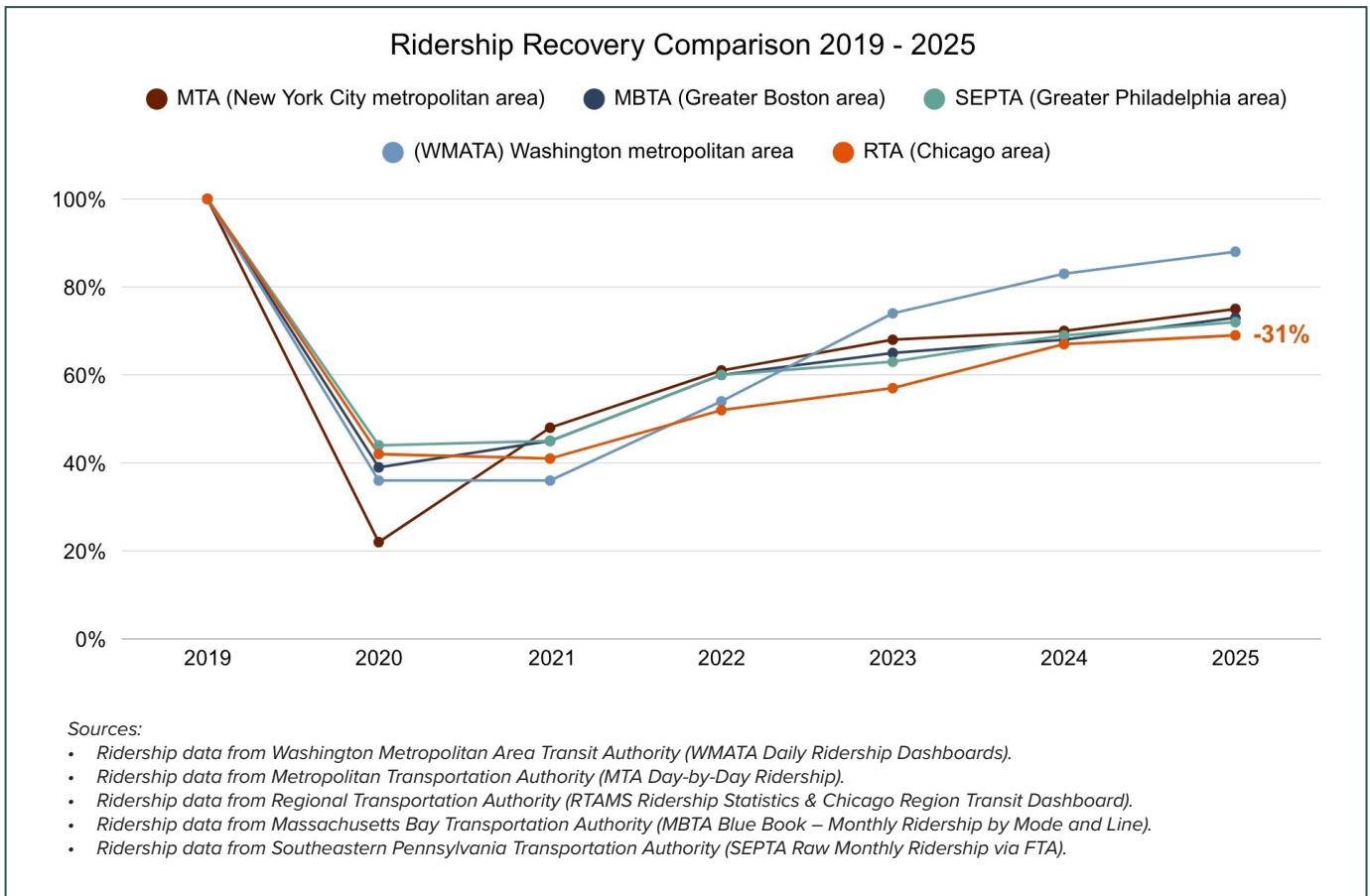
For more than a decade, problems with regional transit have been steadily mounting. The amount of CTA service provided declined due to structural funding shortages, while Pace struggled to serve the growing suburban population. State of Illinois support for transit has also lagged behind that in other states with sizable public transit systems according to the [Plan of Action for Regional Transit](#), a report published in 2023 by the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP). Overall, transit ridership substantially declined for more than a decade. Over the years, multiple independent observers and analysts recommended governance and funding reforms to pull the region's transit system out of decline.²

When the pandemic hit, the region's transit operators struggled to adapt to major changes in travel patterns. The rider experience deteriorated, and many people reduced or stopped taking transit because of real or perceived safety concerns. As the health crisis waned, the Chicago region's transit system has been slower than most other large systems to bring back riders, lagging peer cities, as shown in [Figure 2](#). Reduced fare revenue coupled with the coming exhaustion of federal COVID relief funding resulted in an impending budget crisis. Without bold governance and funding reforms, Northeastern Illinois faced massive service cuts that would have triggered a transit service death spiral. As the financial cliff bore down on us, the refrain became “no revenue without reform.” We needed to both fix the system and fund it. This was a once-in-a-generation opportunity to reimagine our system—how it works and what it provides to the region's residents.

¹ The Regional Transportation Authority was formed in 1974 and reformed in 1983.

² [Mobility for Metropolitan Chicago](#) (Metropolitan Planning Council, September 1994); [Performance Audit: Mass Transit Agencies of Northeastern Illinois](#), (State of Illinois Office of the Auditor General, March 2007); [Northeastern Illinois Public Transit Task Force Report](#) (2014); [Determining the Equitable Allocation of Public Funding for a Regional Transportation System](#), (Delcan Corporation, October 2013); [Plan of Action for Regional Transit](#), (Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, December 2023); MPC Senior Advisor Thomas Bamonte, ["The Transit Governance Model in Chicago: An Outlier,"](#) September 24, 2024.

Figure 2: Ridership Recovery Comparison 2019-2025



What is world-class transit?

According to Transportation for America's 2026 report [Defining World-Class Transit](#):

“A world-class transit system gets people where they need to go, and is an accessible, frequent, reliable, and convenient alternative to automotive travel. Transportation systems with world-class transit options provide their users access to a comparable or better number of jobs, services, and amenities than any other mode of travel.”

The report documents that world class transit systems operate about 130 transit vehicles per 100,000 residents. While Chicago has one of the largest U.S. transit systems, the region operates less than one-third of that world-class target—about 42 transit vehicles per 100,000 residents. New funding from the NITA legislation will get us closer to benchmarks for world-class systems.

World-class transit systems operate about **130** transit vehicles per 100,000 residents

PER 100,000 RESIDENTS

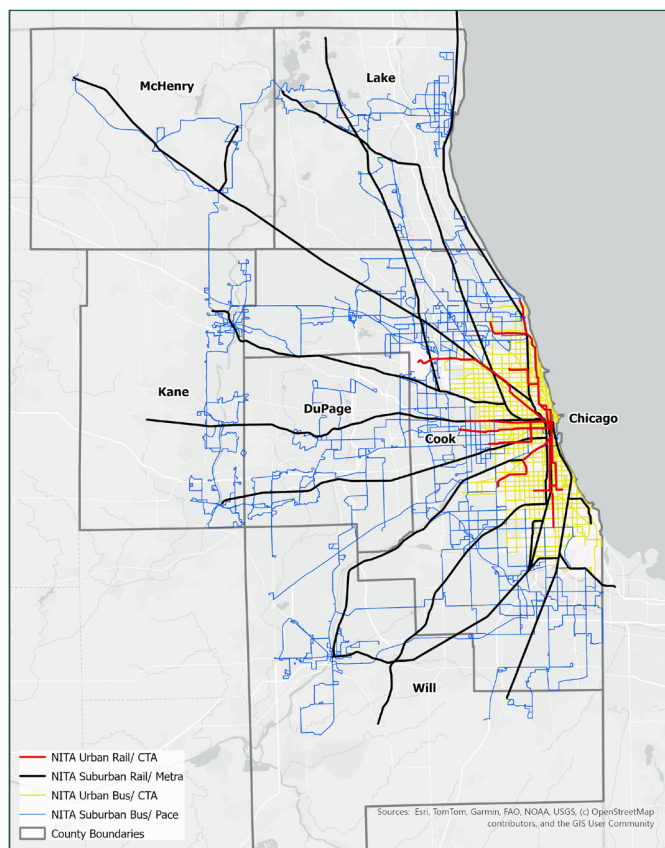
Chicago only operates about **42** transit vehicles per 100,000 residents

Delivering an improved system through effective transit governance

Under the previous governance system, there were a total of 47 board members across the four agencies. This was an unwieldy number of transit decisionmakers for the public to hold accountable. These board members also represented somewhat siloed constituencies. Metra and Pace board members largely came from the suburbs, even though Pace manages paratransit for the whole region and its largest ridership routes serve Chicago—and Metra has 77 stations in the city of Chicago (30%). Many riders utilize more than one system to complete their trip (e.g., 40% of Pace rides include a transfer to/from CTA).³

CTA board members came entirely from the city, even though CTA serves Chicago and 35 suburbs. As shown in Figure 3, there are large areas of the region where service overlaps and must be coordinated better. Two agencies provide bus service (CTA and Pace), with significant overlaps in geography, and this begs the question of how we should consider rationalizing bus operations to get the most value out of every transit dollar, improve the rider experience, and serve the locations that need it most.

Figure 3: Transit Operators in the Chicago Region



Source: *Regional Transportation Authority Mapping and Statistics, RTA (2026)*

It's critical to note that due to rigid, outdated funding formulas, the agencies have been incentivized to compete with one another rather than putting rider needs first and growing overall demand for transit. Planning processes were often uncoordinated across the agencies, taking divergent approaches to neighboring corridors instead of coordinating across municipal boundaries. RTA had little opportunity to provide effective leadership, since their oversight role boiled down to a yes-or-no budget approval decision.

Lawmakers and advocates started considering funding options and governance reforms in the post pandemic era, and in 2022 Illinois passed Public Act 102-1028 requiring CMAP to comprehensively study needed changes to the governance, funding and vision for the region's transit system. This resulted in CMAP's Plan of Action for Regional Transit.

As a result of that process, stakeholders realized that the region needed to create a more transparent and responsive leadership structure accountable to current and prospective transit riders. To address this issue, lawmakers designed SB2111 (Public Act 104-057) to replace the RTA with NITA and vest it with substantial additional powers. These powers include responsibility for transit service planning, budgeting, and capital planning at a regional level. The transit operating agencies (CTA, Metra, and Pace) will deliver service and implement the regional vision set by NITA. NITA's planning will focus on ensuring that the system is rider-centered and improves the ease of travel for people making trips everywhere throughout the region, including trips using more than one operating agency. NITA will develop a regional service plan based on analysis of where the potential need and demand for transit use is greatest and where bus and train service will help the most people access key destinations throughout the region. It will develop regional service standards for transit that reflect innovative and data-informed practices for encouraging travelers to choose transit and then allocate resources to transit operators based on the standards.

Similarly, NITA will lead all capital planning to determine which transit infrastructure projects should be built and where throughout the Chicago region. The agency will consider where riders are traveling regionally, where demand is changing and has the potential to change, and how integration between and among bus and rail routes can be enhanced. A pressing challenge for the new NITA leadership will be addressing the identified backlog of \$30 billion in unfunded capital needs among the transit operators collectively.⁴

3 Regional Transportation Authority, "[Addressing Chicago's transit fiscal cliff should not be a city vs. suburbs issue](#)," September 30, 2025

4 [2025 Capital Asset Condition – Summary Report](#) (Regional Transportation Authority, May 2025)

The overarching goal is to make transit the first choice for travel throughout the region by delivering a world-class system. As transit works better and more people ride, fares paid into the system will increase, which will further support operations funding and strengthen the bottom line.

NITA is also empowered through its budgeting and oversight to manage costs, so it delivers the most high-quality transit service possible with the resources available. While the new funding will address current shortfalls and allow for service expansion, careful stewardship of resources will be critical to ensure sustainable operations over the long term. We must avoid facing another fiscal crisis in the near future.

Unlocking NITA's potential with bold leadership

Bold board and executive leadership is needed to realize the transformational potential of NITA. To achieve a world-class transit system, we need directors who will put in the time, who will ask the hard questions, who have a record of experience demonstrating they understand the significance of their decisions, and who have the entire region's interests at heart. We urge appointing authorities to select directors and support executives who will work hard to achieve maximum benefits from the NITA Act so we realize the best possible results for all types of transit riders, both current and prospective, as well as the region at large.

People want to get where they are going conveniently, reliably, and with minimal stress. It's an added benefit when a transit journey can be an enjoyable shared experience with family or friends. The NITA transformation must fully recognize that current and prospective riders are customers with choices, and that transit leadership must act accordingly to ensure that the transit choice is compelling and competitive across the various types taken in our region. Different transit modes—along with walking and biking—must complement (and not compete with) each other in order to most effectively compete with travel by car. Moving forward, the transit system must show steady improvement, demonstrate transparency, and rebuild riders' trust. Leaders must have a compelling vision and be able to execute on that vision.

Across our region, people desire transit service that is convenient, reliable, safe, affordable, easy to use, and comfortable. NITA's job will be to make that idea a reality. We will need sustained public and political support to uphold the ambitious vision of the NITA legislation and achieve substantive reform. A wide range of stakeholders will have a role in helping NITA deliver the best possible results for the region.

Professionalizing relevant boards of directors

The NITA Act seeks to professionalize the governing boards by defining a higher level of relevant experience required for directors. It is important that the members be diverse and represents the residents in all parts of the region. Directors must have the talent, experience, and expertise to elevate our transit system in the way our region requires.

The new NITA Board will have five appointments each by the City of Chicago, Cook County, the collar counties, and the governor's office. Most NITA Board members will have a dual role—sitting on both the NITA Board and either the CTA, Metra, or Pace Boards. This innovation is intended to encourage coordinated decision making between NITA as a regional body and the operating agencies delivering service day-to-day.

It is in the interest of current and prospective transit riders that all board members have a high level of familiarity with transit and are regular riders themselves, which has not consistently been the case in the past. Board members will receive mandatory training every two years including financial oversight and accountability, procurement, audits, fiduciary responsibilities, and conflicts of interest. Board members will be compensated only if they have received the required training and if they are present at board meetings. To enhance the board's knowledge of how its policies are performing at the service level and to identify opportunities for improvement, a new Riders Advisory Council will advise the NITA Board. The appointments to the four transit boards and the appointing authorities are shown in [Figure 4](#). Clear communications about the board structure are necessary to bring along the public as NITA is implemented.

Additional Resources:

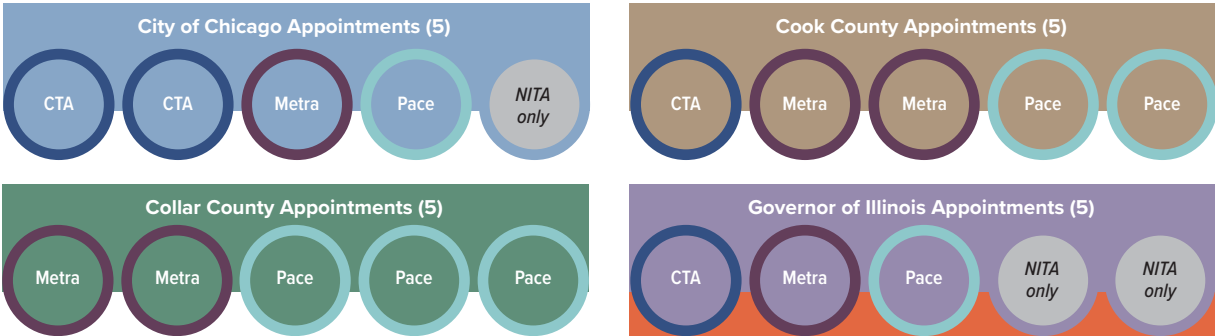
- Transportation for America, ["Defining 'World-Class' Transit,"](#) January 14, 2026
- [Build World-Class Transit in Communities of All Sizes,](#) Transportation for America, February 2026



Figure 4 – NITA, CTA, Metra, and Pace board Appointments

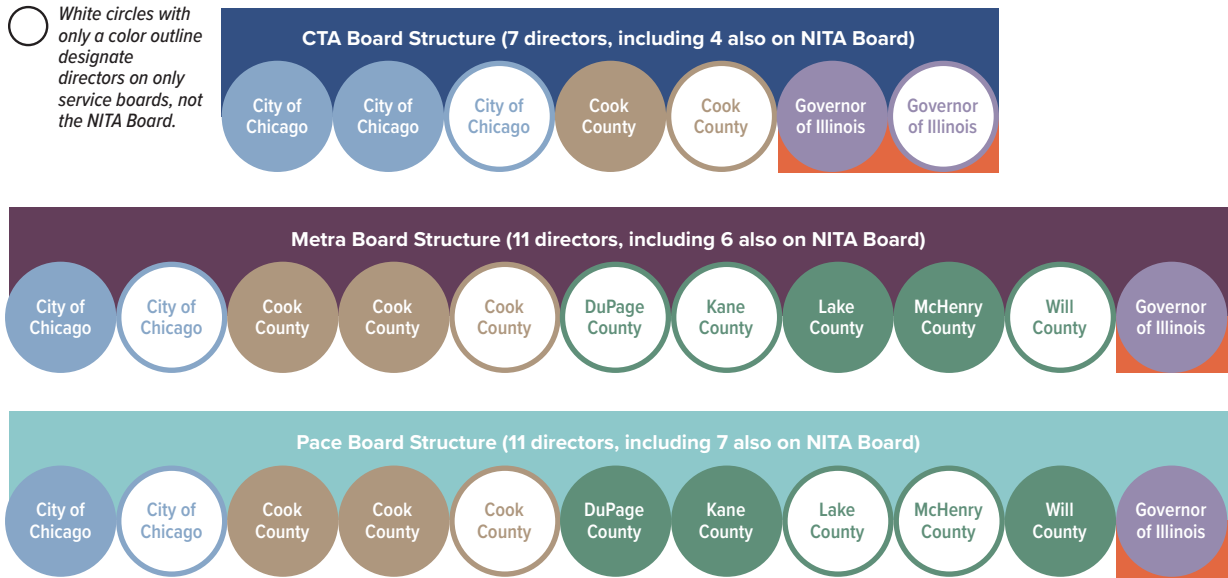
NITA Board Structure

20 directors; 17 with dual appointments to service boards



Service Boards

○ White circles with only a color outline designate directors on only service boards, not the NITA Board.

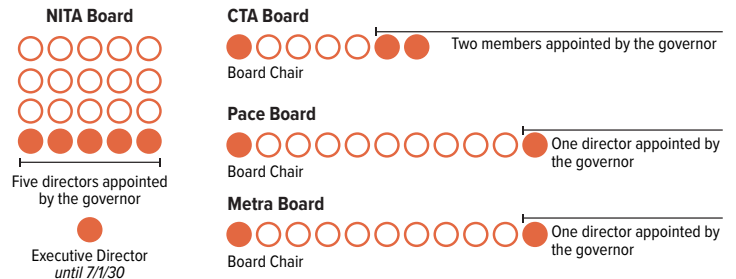


Until 9/1/30, all governor appointments and the chair selected by each service board must also be approved by the State Senate.

As noted in Figure 4 above, the appointments made by the governor and chairs of the NITA, CTA, Pace and Metra Boards must be confirmed by the Illinois State Senate until September 1, 2030. Until July 1, 2030, the NITA executive director selected by the NITA Board must also be approved by the State Senate.

State Senate Approval Requirements

until 9/1/30



Making transit a desirable choice by using a rider-centered approach

People want to get where they are going conveniently and reliably with ease. It's an added benefit when a transit journey can be an enjoyable shared experience with family or friends. The NITA transformation must fully recognize that current and prospective transit riders have choices, and that transit leadership must act accordingly to ensure that the transit choice is compelling and competitive across the various types of trips taken in our region every day. Moving forward, the transit system must show steady improvement, demonstrate transparency, and rebuild riders' trust. Leaders must have a compelling vision and be able to execute that vision.

Across our region, people desire transit service that is convenient, reliable, safe, affordable, easy to use, and comfortable. NITA's job is to make that a reality by visioning, planning, resourcing, and governing our transit agencies. We will need sustained public and political support to uphold the ambitious vision of the NITA legislation and achieve substantive reform.

Executing a thoughtful transition will lead to transformative results

The new regional transit agency will have broad regional planning and programming responsibilities and must be structured so that it can deliver on them. The process for setting up NITA and fully operationalizing all the elements defined in the bill will take time. Given this substantial level of change, the legislation calls for NITA to prepare a transition plan by July 2027 with the help of a third-party contractor procured by the Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT). The law also requires NITA to establish a Transition Working Group to assist NITA and the consultant in preparing the transition plan.

Once the new NITA directors are seated by September 1, 2026, they will undertake a search for a new executive director of the agency. The newly appointed directors at the transit operating agencies will have the same opportunity to select new leadership for their agencies. By law, NITA will be involved in the selection, evaluation, and retention of the Service Board executive directors. While this will be a time of significant change, it will also be a period of significant opportunity for the many talented transportation professionals in the region who want to be part of this exciting transformation.

Learning from the German Model

It's all too common to hear that the underlying conditions and culture are so different in the U.S. that we can't have that shiny and reliable train. But the reality is that to get a high-performing transit system like Germany's, major factors are having a vision, resources, and leadership, and staying the course over a number of years.



A delegation of Illinois legislators, advocates, and labor representatives prepares to board a train in Munich, December 2024 during a learning tour.

The Munich and Berlin regions have many similarities to greater Chicago. It's no secret that Germans love their cars and have a huge automotive industry (the *autobahn* is still going strong). At the same time, Germans have prioritized transit because it is the most desirable way for their urban areas to support sustainable population growth and economic health, to ensure equitable connectivity across the country, and to reduce car-related pollution. While the population density of the Munich, Berlin, and Chicago regions is similar, Munich residents ride transit 3.4 times more often than residents of Northeastern Illinois, and Berliners ride transit 6.3 times more often than we do, as shown in Figure 5. These stats reflect the quality of their transit systems. The systems are easy to understand, are clean, feel safe, run on time, and there is centralized ticketing and rider information for trips throughout each metro area.

Figure 5: Comparing Northeastern Illinois to Munich and Berlin

CITY	CHICAGO	MUNICH	BERLIN
Population	2,721,308 (2024 est.)	1,505,005 (2024)	3,596,999 (2024)
Area	228 sq mi	120 sq mi	344 sq mi
Population Density	11,935/sq mi	12,541/sq mi	10,456/sq mi
Registered vehicles per 1,000 residents	527	597	345
REGION	NITA REGION ¹	OBERBAYERN	BERLIN-BRANDENBURG
Population	8,383,902 (2024 est.)	4,764,548 (2024)	6,153,999 (2024)
Area	3,700 sq mi	6,800 sq mi	11,700 sq mi
Population Density	2,280/sq mi	700/sq mi	525/sq mi
Gross Domestic Product (2024)	\$862.4B	€346.7B (\$409.3B)	€305.4B (\$360.6B)
Annual Regional Ridership	366.3 million (2024)	710 million (2023)	1.7 billion (2024)
Average transit trips per resident	43.7	149.0	276.2

(1) Cook, DuPage, Kane, Lake, McHenry, and Will Counties
Source: DB E.C.O. North America, Inc. | February 2026

Transit riders have a more seamless experience on the German urban systems because they can buy all fares via a single app and communications are integrated. This is possible because all operators in each region are part of a transit association. Their motto is “one network, one timetable, one fare,” to make riding transit a simple and appealing choice. The member transit operators recognize that they will get more riders if they work in an integrated fashion. Their competitor is the car, not other transit operators. They understand that integrated fares and information play a huge role in the rider experience. Transit operators have contracts that include performance measures such as incentives for exceeding goals and fines for not meeting them. They have benefited from an iterative process that started with policy changes to increase ridership, which then led to successive rounds of capital investment to further support increased ridership.

The German model shows the Chicago region a path forward. Now that we have increased transit funding and the commitment by leaders to transform into a new format, we need to diligently work to make that vision a reality.

The German model informed the NITA legislation, which includes the exact language that governs the German transit approach:

...the Northern Illinois Transit Authority shall retain primary responsibility for setting fares, service standards, schedules, and coordinated fare collection so that the public transportation system in the metropolitan region operates on a one-network, one-timetable, one-ticket model for transit users. (Senate Bill 2111, page 59-60)

This model will guide NITA in building a truly regional transit system that prioritizes the needs and experiences of current and prospective transit riders.

Centering rider experience by focusing on safety

The safety of both riders and employees is critical to making transit more attractive to users. Legislators and stakeholders devoted many hours to devising safety solutions found in the NITA legislation. The transit reforms will involve many structures and strategies to address safety proactively. The goal is for everyone to be able to travel on transit at any time of day—alone or in a group—and feel safe. The comprehensive approach to safety defined in the NITA legislation includes:

- **Law Enforcement Task Force:** Led by Cook County Sheriff, this task force will provide coordinated responses to transit safety issues across jurisdictions, starting after the bill goes into effect in June 2026.
- **Transit Ambassadors:** Unarmed staff who will assist riders in coordination with social services, and alert law enforcement of safety issues, starting in 2027.
- **Office of Transit Safety and Experience:** This office within NITA will be responsible for developing, implementing, and overseeing a regionwide safety strategy.
- **A Coordinated Safety Response Council:** Created and supported by the Office of Transit Safety and Experience and comprised of law and social services, tasked with developing a long-term safety strategy that will go into effect in 2027.

- **Board Safety Sub-Committee:** The NITA Board will have a dedicated safety committee comprised of a subset of directors.
- **Safety Infrastructure:** To maximize rider safety and comfort, agencies are directed to evaluate physical station design including lighting and visibility.
- **Safety Technology:** Mobile application that allows riders to report safety issues in real time.

It's important to recognize that despite the media coverage that can sensationalize incidents, overall transit is a very safe choice. A 2025 *Scientific American* article shows "driving a car in the U.S. is far more dangerous than taking public transit—in terms of crash risk *and* crime." While there is no question that improvements must be made in terms of safety strategies for transit—so it both feels safe and *is* safe—the risk we take as we are moving around our communities via different modes of transportation is relative.

These new efforts must take a holistic view of transit rider safety and experience. To fully maximize the benefits of our transit investments, and ensure people want to ride transit, it is also critical to fully address rider experience concerns like smoking and cleanliness of buses and trains.

The safety of both riders and employees is critical to making transit more attractive to users.



Developing standards and plans for integrated regional transit service

ESTABLISHING SERVICE STANDARDS

A primary building block for establishing a regional transit service plan is development of regional service standards. These are formal, measurable criteria used to plan, deliver, and evaluate public transit service. They define the *minimum expectations* and *target levels* for how transit should operate so that service is consistent, equitable, and aligned with NITA's policy goals. In short, they answer: *What level of service should riders reasonably expect, when, and where?*

NITA will develop service standards for buses and trains throughout the metropolitan region. It will consider where current and potential transit travel demand is greatest by assessing metrics including population density, employment density, low-income populations, disabled populations, zero-car households, intersection density, the presence of sidewalks, and related criteria.

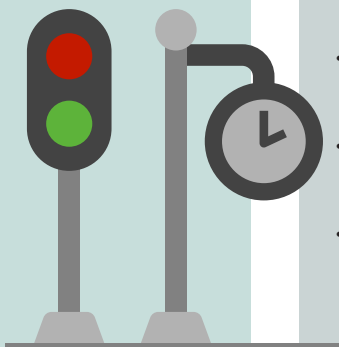
DEVELOPING A REGIONAL SERVICE PLAN

To attract prospective transit riders, NITA must provide a cohesive transit network that is easy to understand and use. A major component of the NITA legislation is the requirement to develop a regional transit service plan setting a unified vision for transit service across multiple operators and jurisdictions. The plan is necessary not only to articulate a shared vision but also to measure our progress toward achieving it. The plan will specify where services should operate, how often they should run, where investments should be prioritized, and how the operating agencies work together. Service planning will entail making policy tradeoffs such as balancing the allocation of operating resources across space and time. While the service plan will be developed with input from the transit operating agencies, NITA will take a comprehensive view to develop an integrated regional service plan regardless of which operators ultimately deliver the service.

What are service standards?

Regional service standards provide information like:

- Where is service provided?
- What is the frequency of service on different types of routes?
- What are the hours of operation for service on different types of routes?



What is a service plan?

A regional transit service plan answers questions like:

- Where should frequent all-day transit exist region-wide?
- How should commuter rail, rapid transit, and buses work together?
- How should limited operating dollars be allocated to maximize access and ridership?
- How can riders experience the system as “one network,” even with multiple providers?

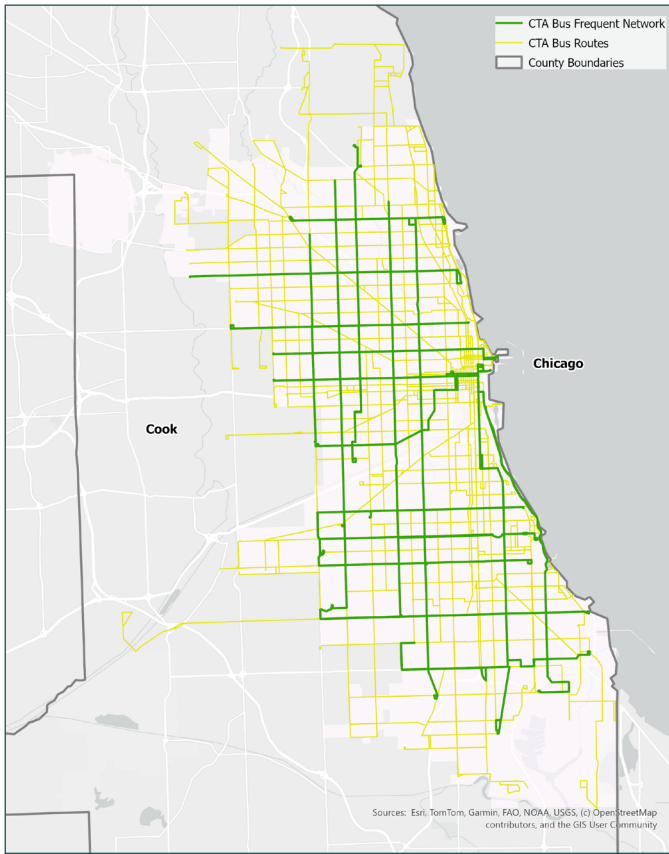
Setting expectations around quality service

High-quality transit service is frequent, reliable, and available when and where people need to travel. When riders can depend on a bus or train arriving frequently throughout the day it's more possible to make convenient connections because the time waiting for the connecting bus or train will be minimal. When frequent service extends into the evenings, transit becomes much more useful to access retail or service jobs that may be scheduled late in the day or to attend social or cultural engagements in the evenings. Transit can become a more viable option for professions like nursing, hospitality, or working for an airline, with shifts into the night.

CTA and Pace are already taking initial steps to improve bus service, as shown in [Figure 6](#). CTA is expanding its frequent bus network with service every 10 minutes. Pace has started operating Pulse, a new type of suburban rapid bus with service every 15 minutes on weekdays for 17 hours per day on Milwaukee and Dempster. Future investments and innovations by NITA can transform bus routes further into a bus rapid transit (BRT) network by establishing dedicated lanes free from traffic, upgrading bus stops/stations/vehicles, and installing transit signal priority to quickly get through intersections. When buses quickly pass by traffic in their own lanes, and trips take less time than driving, transit will become the first choice for many.

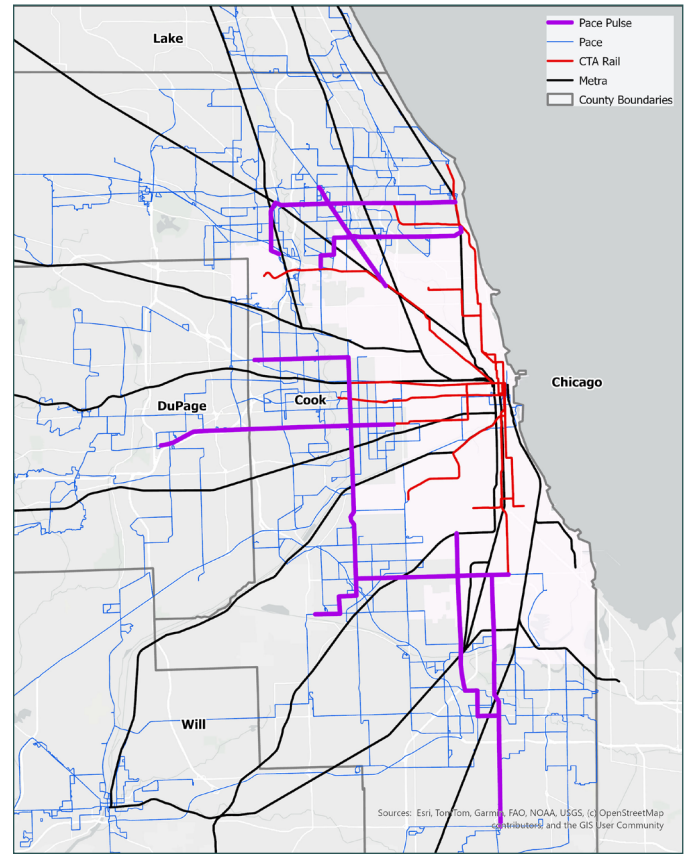
Figure 6

High Frequency Bus Routes in Chicago



Source: Regional Transportation Authority Mapping and Statistics, RTA (2026)
Bus Frequent Network, CTA (2025)

Regional High Frequency Bus Routes



Source: Regional Transportation Authority Mapping and Statistics, RTA (2026)
Pulse: Pace's Rapid Transit Network, Pace (2025)

We can leverage the extensive commuter rail infrastructure we already have to serve residents in new and different ways. Since traditional commuting has decreased and more people work from home at least part of the time, NITA will work to transform our extensive commuter rail network into “regional rail,” offering frequent rail service throughout the day both inbound and outbound. For example, if trains were to run more frequently during a greater period of the day both inbound and outbound, rail would become more competitive for reverse commutes, trips between the suburbs, or local tourism like day trips between the city and suburbs for shopping, culture, or recreation.

NITA should also explore investments needed to enable faster and more convenient through-trips across Chicago on Metra and CTA, permitting the two systems to provide a more unified travel experience as happens on regional and urban rail systems in peer cities across the globe. Such improvements could eventually allow people to take cross-town or cross-region journeys with fewer or no transfers downtown. For example, how could we make it possible for someone from Oak Lawn to ride the Metra Southwest Service to downtown Chicago and have a seamless transfer to the Metra UP-North? Currently the Southwest Service operates out of Union Station and the UP-North service operates out of Ogilvie Station three blocks to the north. What connections could be built so a rider could make a continuous trip from south to north or vice versa? Similarly, what connections could be built so riders that arrive from the south at the LaSalle Street or Millennium Street stations in Chicago could connect to routes traveling north, which currently depart from Union Station (North Central Service, Milwaukee District North, and Milwaukee District West or Ogilvie Transportation Center (UP-North, UP-Northwest, and UP-West?

We must design a system that works for people of all abilities throughout their lives

Our region is diverse and has a range of population densities. Not every community is directly connected to transit. In many areas of the region where population density is not at a level to support fixed route transit, demand response—or Dial-a-Ride—services are in operation. These include MCRide in McHenry County, Ride in Kane, Ride Lake County and local dial-a-ride providers under contract to Pace in DuPage and Will Counties. While this solution is an effective way to connect residents, a known challenge for riders is that these services have varied eligibility requirements, fares, and service boundaries, and information on how to ride is fragmented.

NITA will establish a Dial-a-Ride Service Coordination Council to advise on improving demand response service quality, coordination, and consistency throughout the region. NITA will hire a third party to evaluate existing programs and make recommendations for coordinated service across the region. This will include consideration of how riders can make trips across county boundaries, potential changes to hours of service, and consistency in response times and eligibility across the region. After the recommendations have been completed, the Authority may establish a Dial-A- Ride service program policy and may authorize funding for services that adhere to it.

The quality of transit service has a major impact on quality of life for people with disabilities who may not have other transportation options. NITA will establish a new Office of Disability Policy and Planning that will consider accessibility throughout the entire transit system, including connections between services. This office will develop the first-ever Regional Transit Accessibility plan. A regional ADA Advisory Council will provide guidance to NITA directors on how to make the system work better for people with disabilities.

When fixed-route transit is fully accessible, frequent, and reliable, people with disabilities are more likely to choose it because it provides more travel time options and greater spontaneity. In contrast, paratransit typically involves making a reservation in advance and can have long wait times. A more accessible fixed-route system will enable a higher quality of life for the many people in the region that cannot or choose not to drive because of a disability.

Individuals who need to use ADA Paratransit service must apply and be found eligible according to ADA guidelines. Until now, this certification was handled individually by each regional transit system. Under the new law, there will be “visitor” certification for paratransit, which will mean certified riders can ride any paratransit service in the state and this will greatly simplify riding for paratransit users statewide.

When transit is affordable for everyone, more people realize its benefits

For many years, riders have wanted integrated fares on the regional transit system, so they don’t have to pay twice, using two separate fare mechanisms, if they transfer between services. Restructuring will bring all fare policy decisions and the regional budget under NITA, making integrated fares possible. In fact, the legislation requires NITA to “develop and implement a regionally coordinated and consolidated fare collection system.” This will make it easier to use transit and affordably connect with the rich opportunities for work, culture, and recreation throughout our region.

At the same time, for some riders, transit fares are a real barrier to mobility. That’s why the legislation establishes a low-income fare program, beyond the current programs limited to seniors, people with disabilities, and other specific groups. Another exciting development is the legislation mandates the establishment of “fare-capping,” which is a fare payment strategy in place on other systems worldwide like New York, London, and Sydney. A fare-capping program set up across providers will make riding free for the duration of a daily, weekly, monthly, or 30-day pass once the rider has purchased enough regular one-way fares to reach the amount of an applicable pass. This essentially allows riders to buy a transit pass on a pay-as-you go basis.

Improving our system through increased accountability

An overriding reason that NITA was formed is to provide increased accountability about how public dollars are spent and how transit is delivered as a public service. Residents of the Chicago region expect more than they have been getting from the existing transit system. Riders have been very frustrated by transit apps promising trains and buses that don't arrive, resulting in the moniker of "ghost buses." A key promise of creating a new agency with robust oversight responsibilities is having clear, consistent performance data. Moving forward, NITA will require rigorous and transparent reporting on whether the operators are delivering all scheduled service, so any issues can be promptly tracked, understood, and addressed.

To increase oversight, the Auditor General of the State of Illinois will conduct a performance audit of NITA and the operating agencies every five years. Additionally, the NITA Board will appoint the new position of Chief Internal Auditor, who shall report directly to the Board. The Auditor and team may be asked to conduct financial, compliance, or other audits at least once every two years.

To ensure that the transit system is being run to generate optimum results with every public dollar invested, the NITA Chief Internal Auditor will report on management efficiencies and proposals for increasing cost effectiveness. They will also make objectives and performance standards for audits of any transit program.

The executive director (ED) of NITA is charged with transforming the region's transit system. This role will be held to a high standard, and annually the Board will conduct a formal performance evaluation. The NITA Board must also approve operating agency ED appointments, and the NITA Chair and ED must be involved in the operating agency ED selection process. Each operating agency ED must have demonstrated experience with one or more of the following areas: (i) public transportation system operations; (ii) infrastructure capital project management; or (iii) legal or human resource management for a public agency. The EDs of the operating agencies will be expected to direct delivery of regional transit service, as defined by NITA's regional service plan and as assigned to them by NITA. The legislation has put into place safeguards that in the event that any operating agency ED is found to have failed to comply with the regional service plan, 5-year capital program, or annual budget and 2-year financial plan approved by NITA, the NITA Board has the authority to terminate their employment.

Building ridership and sustainable communities through transit-supportive development

ELIMINATION OF PARKING MINIMUMS

The legislation takes important steps to encourage dense, walkable development near transit so that more people can live, work, shop, and access recreation via transit. The legislation ensures communities with frequent transit will "right-size" parking by prohibiting local jurisdictions from setting required parking minimums for developments near transit. This addresses the inherent conflict between creating a safe, walkable area around a transit station and overbuilding parking. And it allows the market, rather than government regulators, to determine the right amount of parking for each development.

JOINT DEVELOPMENT

Many communities and neighborhoods in the Chicago region are anchored by a transit station, and many corridors are identified with bus routes carrying thousands of riders per day. The legislation takes an important step to enable NITA to participate in "joint development," which means NITA can develop property it owns or that is transferred to its ownership, to build housing or mixed-use development. This is a long-term strategy for increasing ridership. By building destinations that are accessible by transit throughout the region, transit will become more useful for residents. As NITA begins to manage a portfolio of real estate generating rental income, that revenue can be invested in a variety of ways such as subsidizing affordable housing or providing more transit service. All NITA joint development will need to adhere to applicable local zoning laws. There is significant potential to build projects that both enhance communities and benefit transit riders, using inclusive processes, retaining community character, improving walkability, and incorporating affordability.

Ultimately, the vision is for substantial transit-supportive development to occur at key hubs throughout the region and improve mobility along the corridors that connect them. Communities can decide if they want to grow and welcome more transit riders. If so, more service will be provided in these locations. Over time, NITA can increase transit frequency between growing centers, making places throughout the region more economically competitive and vibrant while ensuring accessibility via sustainable transportation.

Making transit more convenient by developing regional mobility hubs

Moving forward, as part of service planning, NITA will be developing a single timetable for the entire region that will maximize convenient connections between urban bus, urban rail, suburban bus, and regional rail. Beyond the downtown Metra rail stations there are many key regional locations where two or three services are co-located and schedules should be more closely coordinated so riders can easily transfer. As shown in [Figure 7](#), these locations include:

- At Evanston Davis Street, riders can access CTA Purple Line trains, Pace buses, and Metra UP-North trains
- In Wilmette, riders can access CTA Purple Line and Pace North Shore routes
- In Oak Park, riders can access Metra UP-West, the CTA Green Line, and Pace buses
- In Blue Island, riders can access the Metra Rock Island and Electric District and multiple Pace bus routes
- At 95th Street, riders can access the CTA Red Line and many Pace and CTA buses
- In Rosemont, riders can access CTA Blue Line and Pace bus routes
- At the Jefferson Park transit center, riders can access Metra –UP-North, the CTA Blue Line, and many Pace buses
- In Harvey, riders can access Metra Electric trains and multiple Pace bus routes

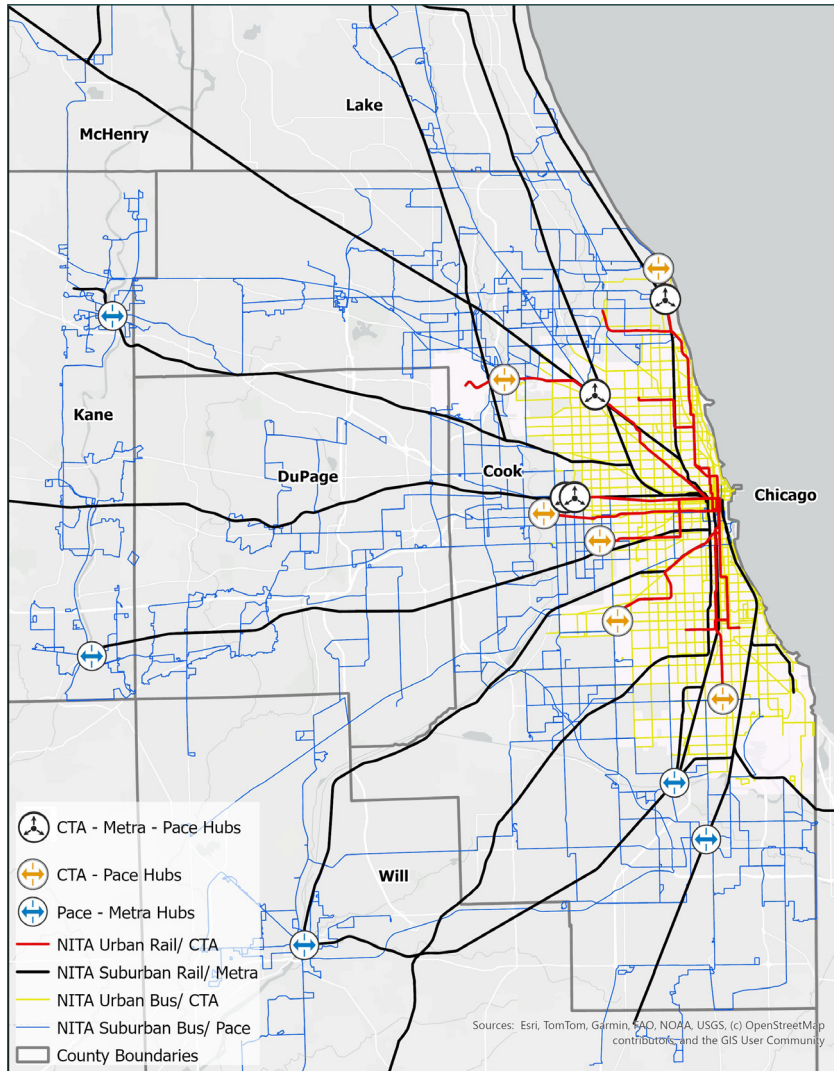
At mobility hubs, not only do multiple transit lines connect, but the entire station area should be developed to be fully ADA accessible, walkable, and offer connections with micromobility like shared bicycles and scooters. Plentiful secure bike parking should be available. Signage should be added or enhanced to ensure riders can easily understand how to make connections. Protocols should be put in place so that if a train is delayed, connecting buses can be notified to wait for a short period to facilitate connections. Every effort should be made to create a system that prioritizes rider connections, so there is less chance of missing them and arriving late to a destination. When transit connections are at hubs where retail and services like daycare are available, people can increase their efficiency in combination with riding transit.

The opportunity lies before us to coordinate more development with transit so the whole system works better. Ideally, amenities like convenience stores and coffee shops are located in or adjacent to regional mobility hubs. Longer term, these hubs should be priority locations for adjacent retail or services as part of transit-oriented development projects. This will make riding transit even more convenient, enjoyable and sustainable.



Image credit: [Shared-Use Mobility Center](#)

Figure 7: Current Regional Mobility Hubs with Multiple Transit Services



Source: Regional Transportation Authority Mapping and Statistics, RTA (2026)

Transportation hubs are defined as locations where services from the three transit operators converge, or, in suburban contexts, where multiple bus routes and rail converge into one station, with infrastructure to support operations and user amenities.

Everyone has a stake in ensuring NITA is successful

With the NITA Act, Illinois has decided to make a transformational investment in transit. It's undeniable that transit is one of the key differentiators that helps Illinois attract and maintain businesses, residents, and talent that values convenient, affordable transportation and a sustainable, active lifestyle. The NITA Act is the most transformative legislation for a major U.S. transit system in decades. Agencies around the country are eagerly watching how we implement it. This is the Chicago region's opportunity to truly double down on transit and make our system a model for other states and regions. We hope to see transit that is so appealing that many more households make it their primary mode of transportation. We will be successful when more residents can devote less income to financing vehicles and can spend more of their budgets on enjoying the region's attractions and supporting local businesses. Everyone—whether a current or prospective future rider—has a stake in the success of NITA given its potential to drive regional economic activity, sustainable growth, and improved quality of life. Let's all work together to make sure NITA is wildly successful.

Appendix: Implementation Deadlines for The Northern Illinois Transit Authority



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View this report in digital format, access the companion legislation guide, and learn more here:



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