Project Report

Pre-NITA Evaluation of Regional Transit Service Coordination

July 2026

Regional Transportation Authority

rta Regional Transportation Authority | TYLin

Contents

1. Introduction ... 3
2. Service Planning Before NITA ... 4
Routine Service Planning ... 4
Network Plans ... 5
CTA Bus Vision ... 5
Pace ReVision ... 5
Metra Systemwide Network Plan ... 6
Summary and Future Opportunities ... 6
3. Evaluation of Current Regional Transfer Quality ... 9
Methodology ... 10
Scheduled Transfer Analysis Using GTFS ... 10
Ventra Transfer Volume Analysis ... 12
Limitations ... 12
Toolbox of Potential Solutions to Coordination Issues ... 13
Summary of Findings ... 15
4. Service Planning Under NITA ... 18
Preparing for NITA ... 18
NITA Requirements ... 19
Regionally Coordinated Service Plan ... 19
Service Standards ... 20
Transit Propensity ... 20
Special Event Coordination ... 21
Changes to Special Event Processes ... 21
Best Practices & Policies ... 22
5. Case Studies of Regional Service Planning ... 24
Bay Area "Big Sync" ... 24
Background ... 24
Regional Planning and Coordination ... 24
Service Planning and Scheduling Processes ... 25
Montreal ARTM ... 26
Background ... 26
Regional Planning and Coordination ... 27
Service Planning and Scheduling Processes ... 28
Swiss Federal Office of Transport ... 28
Background ... 28
Regional Planning and Coordination ... 29
Service Planning and Scheduling Processes ... 29
Toronto Metrolinx ... 30
Background ... 30
Regional Planning and Coordination ... 31
Service Planning and Scheduling Processes ... 31
6. Summary ... 33

1. Introduction

The Northern Illinois Transit Authority (NITA) Act came into effect on June 1, 2026. It includes many reforms to the structure of public transit in northeastern Illinois. The act establishes the Northern Illinois Transit Authority (NITA) as a new regional public transit governing body responsible for overseeing, coordinating, funding, and modernizing the entire public transportation network across the six-county metropolitan Chicago region comprising Cook, DuPage, Kane, Lake, McHenry, and Will Counties. In this capacity, NITA is to work closely with the three transit operators in the region, namely the Chicago Transportation Authority (CTA), Metra, and Pace Suburban Bus (Pace), referred to collectively as the Service Boards.

This report focuses on transit service planning — both the status quo process and the intermediate steps that agencies are collectively taking or could consider taking before NITA's reforms are operationalized in 2027 and 2028. To understand the status quo, the first sections of this report summarize current service planning efforts at each agency and analyze how well current interagency transfers are coordinated. To anticipate the reformed service planning process, the latter sections of this report summarize the new legislative requirements and case studies of other regional agencies that play a meaningful role in service planning. All of this should help NITA form an implementation strategy that ensures a smooth transition to an effective new service planning process.

2. Service Planning Before NITA

Routine Service Planning

Transit service planners and schedulers at CTA, Pace, and Metra currently consider a range of factors when working to improve the services they oversee. Considerations may include:

- managing existing passenger loads to avoid overcrowding
- aligning service to match changing travel patterns
- responding to community requests
- ensuring vehicles and operators are deployed efficiently
- improving schedule reliability
- providing convenient transfer opportunities between services
- balancing additional internal and external priorities.

High-level coordination of service changes occurs between the Service Boards through regular interagency meetings and special outreach for key changes. The RTA has set a couple of avenues for regional coordination, including funding for Community Planning or Access to Transit studies that sometimes involve early planning for new services like Pace Pulse, and through coordination and signage meetings to ensure riders receive accurate information. Service Boards sometimes engage each other as stakeholders and sometimes act as full planning partners. For example, if Metra plans to change one of its schedules, that information will be shared with Pace and CTA so that connecting bus routes can be adjusted accordingly. Interagency coordination is especially common when planning for the areas where CTA and Pace services connect; for example, the CTA/Pace North Shore Coordination Plan and the South Halsted Bus Corridor Enhancement Project both involved extensive interagency coordination. Recently, the Transit Service Working Group facilitated by RTA has provided a new venue for ongoing regional service planning coordination.

CTA and Pace only make service changes a few times each year, when a "pick" or "bid" is planned. Picks are arranged with the operators' unions and provide an opportunity for operators to pick new work assignments. Service changes typically need to be approved months before the pick takes effect. This time is needed to complete various practical steps such as updating internal transit data systems, updating public information such as schedules, updating stop signage, and communicating the changes to riders. The time required may be longer if the service change requires the hiring of additional operators or the procurement of additional vehicles. The approval process itself also can be time-consuming, especially for "major" service changes that require equity analysis and public hearings.

Metra makes service changes on a more ad-hoc basis, primarily catalyzed by freight railroad approvals and external requests and requirements. Across the eleven lines of service, several

operate across rights of way owned by freight railroads, with their own employees operating Metra service. As a result, while Metra evaluates service changes regularly, there are many coordinating steps that happen before a schedule change can occur.

Network Plans

The three Service Boards regularly conduct network planning exercises that evaluate potential changes to transit services. These studies typically include analysis of travel markets, review of existing network performance, development of alternative network concepts, coordination with other planning efforts, and community engagement. As of June of 2026, all three Service Boards are undertaking network planning efforts. This section summarizes these ongoing efforts and discusses opportunities to strengthen them through a more regionally unified approach.

CTA Bus Vision

CTA's Bus Vision initiative "aims to examine, evaluate, and reimagine the entire CTA bus network." Its first phase included a Framing Report that evaluated existing conditions, completed in 2023. That report emphasized the importance of a frequent grid, the equity benefits of a strong bus network, and the need to improve travel speeds. Building on the Framing Report findings, CTA has invested in its Frequent Network to expand access to 10 minute or better service on all days, including evening and midday times.

The next phase of this project involves public outreach to gather feedback on what riders and the public think about the bus network, with the intent of guiding CTA's decision-making framework. The outreach timeline is now being aligned with the NITA transition. No comparable study of the CTA rail network is currently planned.

Pace ReVision

In the ReVision plan, Pace seeks to "modernize our service offerings to continue being a good steward of taxpayer resources while maximizing access to jobs, education, medical services, and other destinations." Following an analysis of existing conditions, three network concepts were released in 2024 to illustrate potential visions and tradeoffs. The current draft network plan prioritizes ridership and would make significant improvements to off-peak and weekend service. Building on this work, Pace has recently been investing in service increases on key corridors, including future Pulse rapid transit lines.

The next phase of this project involves public outreach. Planned activities include virtual open houses, a survey, social media engagement, popup events, transit ambassadors, presentations to elected officials, and board presentations. The outreach timeline is now being aligned with the NITA transition.

Metra Systemwide Network Plan

Metra's Systemwide Network Plan will describe the enhancements needed to implement regional rail as envisioned in the 2023–27 Strategic Plan, My Metra, Our Future. The regional rail model will emphasize off-peak and weekend service to make the system more useful for purposes beyond traditional commuting. This plan is also expected to improve connections with CTA, Pace, NICTD, and Amtrak through increased frequency.

The first phase of enhancements (Regional Rail 1.0) will focus on operational improvements. Schedules will run on all days with 30–60-minute frequency and stop patterns will be simplified. This phase involves limited investments in new vehicles and other capital projects such as infill stations. The second phase of enhancements (Regional Rail 2.0) would make major capital investments to achieve 15–30-minute frequency on all lines.

Metra's next steps include outreach to stakeholders and the public. This outreach would involve freight railroad partners, the Metra Board, county DOTs, Chicago DOT, CMAP, Amtrak, advocacy groups, and a public meeting. The outreach timeline is now being aligned with the NITA transition.

Summary and Future Opportunities

Each Service Board is working to enhance and modernize their network, especially as ridership patterns settle toward a new post-pandemic normal that is less reliant on work trips. Common themes in their network planning work include a focus on off-peak and weekend service and enhanced frequency in high-ridership markets. Many of these proposed changes are likely to enhance interagency connections as schedules become more frequent and consistent.

Still, there is room for improved integration: The Service Boards typically approach their services as three separate networks rather than a unified regional network. Partner agencies are sometimes treated as stakeholders who are only engaged at the end of a planning process. As part of the NITA reforms, the silos separating each agency's service planning process must give way to a fully collaborative approach. Opportunities for improved collaboration could include information sharing, collaborative planning, and public communication/engagement.

Information sharing opportunities:

- Currently each Service Board maintains **separate data systems** for their schedules, ridership, transfer data, and other performance data. Often this information is stored using incompatible software systems and formats. These data systems could be connected or consolidated to ensure that planners have data about partner agencies readily available.

Collaborative planning opportunities:

- Before implementing major schedule changes, NITA and Service Boards should conduct analysis of the **impact on interagency transfer coordination**. This could leverage a version of the schedule coordination evaluation tool described in the next section.
- NITA should conduct service coordination and network planning reviews focused on key areas **where the Service Boards connect** with each other:
    - Rebrand and focus on shared transfer terminals serviced by multiple Service Boards as NITA Hubs
    - Focus on Metra stations that become more prominent connection points due to simplified stop patterns.
    - Plan regionally for any infill Metra stations that are developed based on the SNP.
    - Rethink CTA or Pace bus route terminals located within ½ mile of the Chicago city boundary. Many of these terminals are legacy facilities that date back to streetcar systems. Considering modern travel patterns, we should evaluate whether these terminals are logical places for riders to transfer between services or whether a different route structure would better serve customer needs.

Public communication/engagement opportunities:

- Ensure **NITA is solely responsible for engaging stakeholders**. NITA can ensure when engagement requires one, two, or all three Service Boards to participate and partner.
- **Centralize customer research** activities, such that one Service Board's passenger survey links to other transit surveys, or one survey covers all Service Boards.
- NITA could coordinate public engagement activities to begin **presenting the network plans as a unified effort**. This regional network planning process could begin with NITA hosting a coalition meeting with all Service Boards represented. Other joint meetings could be held at intersecting service areas. This could include:
    - suburban Metra stations where Pace and Metra are both improving off-peak schedules

- Chicago neighborhoods where new infill Metra stations are proposed with connecting CTA Frequent Network services
- communities near the Chicago boundary where Pace and CTA are coordinating their networks, such as the South Halsted Corridor

3. Evaluation of Current Regional Transfer Quality

While most transfers occur within the CTA network, more investment in a robust regional interagency transfer network could unlock opportunities to bring non-transit riders to ride the system. The regional transfer analysis evaluated how well scheduled transit services support regional transfers between CTA, Pace, and Metra at key locations across the region. The purpose was to identify where transfer timing already supports rider connections, where schedules create long waits, and where high observed transfer demand may warrant near-term coordination among the Service Boards for schedule improvements. The analysis results were presented in a shared Power BI report with the RTA and the NITA Transition Working Group on Transit Service.

The analysis showed that transfer quality is uneven across the region. Of over 140,000 potential transfer opportunities reviewed, 45% fell within the target wait window of 3–15 minutes. It is noteworthy that improving these transfer opportunities may require tradeoffs in scheduling between cost and rider transfer quality. However, the statistic is a good baseline to evaluate future improvements that could be implemented with the NITA Service Plan.

Currently, the median scheduled wait time is approximately 14 minutes, but the distribution is skewed by very long waits that are typically associated with gaps in the connecting route's service span rather than minor schedule misalignment. This distinction is important because some transfer issues can be addressed through timetable coordination, while others require investment in added trips[1] or expanded hours of service, which was previously difficult due to lack of funding.

[1] For example, a route that runs hourly can typically be scheduled to connect with one other hourly service, but adding trips to increase the route's frequency may make additional timed connections possible.

METHODOLOGY

Scheduled Transfer Analysis Using GTFS

The Regional Transfer Quality Assessment is primarily an analysis of each Service Board's transit schedules. This analysis utilized schedule data from public General Transit Feed Specification (GTFS) feeds to determine where/when transfers are well coordinated today and where/when connection times may be too long or too short. The RTA and TYLin project teams collaborated to determine key regional transfer locations in order to narrow the focus of this detailed analysis. Analysis was completed for over 60 transfer locations across the region, but most of the results in this report will focus on 11 high-priority locations that provide coverage to all RTA counties, as shown in Figure 1.

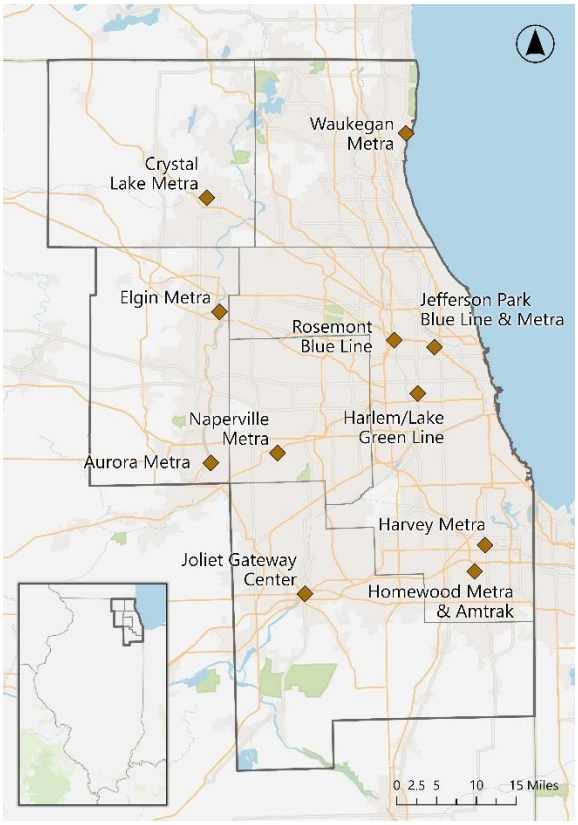

Figure 1. High Priority Transfer Locations Reviewed

The scheduled service analysis began by creating a composite GTFS dataset combining CTA, Pace, and Metra GTFS schedules. The key regional transfer locations were defined and mapped as point locations. For each location, the analysis identified nearby stops within a 400-meter straight-line catchment for bus and local transit stops, and an 800-meter catchment for rail stations. The larger rail catchment was used because rail transfer areas often include larger station footprints, multiple entrances, platforms, bus bays, and nearby stops that function as part of the same transfer environment. The analysis selected the closest stop per route-direction at each location, to avoid counting the same transfer opportunity multiple times.

For each key location, the model identified all active trips serving the nearby stops. Weekday, Saturday, and Sunday service dates from April 2026 were selected from the composite GTFS to reflect typical scheduled service conditions. Each arriving trip was compared against subsequent departures on other route-directions serving the same transfer location. Potential connections were then classified according to whether they fell within the acceptable transfer time period.

What is an acceptable transfer time period?

An acceptable scheduled transfer is one that gives riders enough time to reliably make their connection without requiring an excessive wait. For this analysis, three minutes was used as the minimum transfer time, while 15 minutes was the maximum acceptable wait.

A literature review was conducted to inform this definition. It revealed that wait time is perceived as significantly longer than time spent in a vehicle,[2] and that willingness to wait varies based on location, time of day, weather conditions, and available amenities.[3] A tighter transfer time window of 5–10 minutes might be considered "convenient" rather than just acceptable. Waits that are too short may be unreliable, as buses five minutes late are considered "on time" in the Chicago region. Additionally, a survey of transit users in Washington, D.C., showed that 83% were unwilling to wait more than 10 minutes. The analysis in this report focuses on a more achievable "acceptable" time period, but a more ambitious standard can be studied as well.

Trips that were not within an acceptable transfer period were classified as too short, too long, or as having no candidate transfer. This allowed the analysis to distinguish between tight connections, excessive waits, and cases where no downstream trip was available after the arriving trip. The analysis was run for multiple day types and time periods, including an all-day overview and specific time periods: early morning, AM peak, midday, PM peak, evening, late evening, and overnight.

The main GTFS analysis output was a matrix showing, for each location, day type, time period, and route-direction, the share of arriving trips with an acceptable scheduled connection to a departing trip on another route-direction. A higher percentage indicates that riders arriving on that route-direction are more likely to find a conveniently timed transfer. These results were summarized by location and route-direction pair to identify specific schedule pairings that may warrant further review.

How Often Riders Can Make an Acceptable Transfer

Aurora *Time Period: 15:00-19:00*

Arriving Route / Direction	BNSF Chicago Union Station	PACE 524 West	PACE 530 East	PACE 530 West	PACE 533 North	PACE 802 North
BNSF Aurora		20.0%	60.0%	60.0%	60.0%	60.0%
PACE 524 East	40.0%		80.0%	80.0%	60.0%	40.0%
PACE 530 East	66.7%	44.4%			66.7%	77.8%
PACE 530 West	66.7%	44.4%			77.8%	88.9%
PACE 533 South	37.5%	50.0%	87.5%	87.5%		100.0%
PACE 802 South	55.6%	44.4%	88.9%	88.9%	77.8%	

Figure 2. Example of the Transfer Matrix Dashboard for the Aurora Transportation Center on Weekdays

[2] Perception of Waiting Time at Transit Stops and Stations. Yingling Fan, Andrew Guthrie, David Levinson, 2016.
[3] Predicting Acceptable Wait Times for Patrons at Transit Bus Stops by Time of Day. Mineta Transportation Institute. Stephen Arhin, 2019.

Ventra Transfer Volume Analysis

Historical Ventra transfer records from September and October 2025, the most recent available data from a typical high-ridership period, were cleaned and analyzed to summarize observed CTA and Pace transfer volumes by day type, operator, route, and direction. Ventra identifies transfers as subsequent fare taps within three hours of the first tap. The observed transfer volumes were compared with the scheduled transfer quality results to identify where riders are already making difficult connections and where schedule coordination may provide meaningful benefit.

This combined approach allowed the project team to gain a greater understanding of the relationship between scheduled transfer quality and recent observed rider usage. Whether a scheduled transfer opportunity is convenient and whether riders are using that connection are important factors to consider when prioritizing transit schedule improvements. Strong candidates for near-term coordination are transfer route pairs or locations with both high observed Ventra transfer activity and poor scheduled-transfer quality. These locations indicate that many riders are already making the connection despite inconvenient timing. On the other hand, low-volume transfer pairs with poor transfer quality should not be dismissed automatically because weak transfer use may reflect suppressed demand, access barriers, or limited awareness of the connection. The methodology therefore supports both a regional scan of transfer quality and a focused review of specific priority locations that have regional significance.

Limitations

The transfer analysis provides a regional review of scheduled transfer quality to inform decision-making and prioritization of regional improvements. This should be interpreted as a planning-level assessment rather than a complete measure of the rider transfer experience, due to several limitations inherent to the GTFS data inputs. The GTFS used in the analysis reflected scheduled service only and does not capture actual operating conditions such as vehicle delays, imperfect reliability, schedule delivery completeness, crowding, elevator outages or platform access impacting accessibility, or temporary service disruptions.

While GTFS data is standardized, there is no industry-wide approved GTFS validator, and it is not required for an agency to thoroughly validate a GTFS feed before sharing it. In addition, GTFS has many optional fields, and it is common for individual agencies to add their own fields or separate text files, such as a file containing legal information for app developers. Thus, it is not guaranteed that transit agencies have thoroughly entered all relevant information in their GTFS or that separate agencies' GTFS is easily compatible for creating composite feeds. Some related risks that arose in this analysis included data cleaning and editing to resolve differences in fields such as route naming conventions, route direction, and day type abbreviations. Differences in time conventions for overnight service (i.e. Monday at 27:00 vs. Tuesday at 03:00) were not manually resolved, which brings limitations to analyzing early morning time periods.

Ventra data adds value to this assessment by showing real-world transfer activity, but it can only reflect the service delivered at a point in time. It does not account for unmet or suppressed

demand. A low Ventra transfer volume may indicate limited demand, but it may also reflect a transfer that is poorly timed, limited in days or time periods available, difficult to navigate, inconvenient to access, or not understood by riders. For this reason, low-volume transfer pairs with weak scheduled-transfer quality should not be immediately dismissed without additional analysis, such as rider surveys or local engagement.

The Ventra analysis was also limited by several issues with data quality or availability:

- Transfer location data were insufficient to confirm the locations that transfers occurred. Therefore, when transfer counts are queried between a pair of routes, the results include all transfers between those routes (even if the routes intersect at more than one location).
- Metra transfer data are unavailable, as current fare ticketing software and processes are not directly compatible with CTA and Pace data. While efforts are underway to estimate Metra transfer activity, no Metra transfer data were available for the current analysis.
- CTA rail transfers are based on the station where a rider enters the system, and not the location where the rider alights.
- Pace bus transfer data have a high prevalence of missing information, such that route direction could not be included in analysis. As a result, Pace transfers are evaluated on a route-to-route basis, without direction.

Toolbox of Potential Solutions to Coordination Issues

Different types of transfer coordination issues require different service planning responses. While it may not be possible to provide a convenient transfer opportunity between every possible route combination, certain route combinations should be prioritized based on transfer volumes and their impact on regional connectivity, amongst other factors. Service planners and schedulers should consider a toolbox of potential solutions based on the specific transfer coordination issues they seek to address. The potential tools are summarized in the table below and described in more detail following the table.

Table 1. Summary of tools that can be considered to address different connection issues

Type of coordination issue faced	Tools to consider
Connection is too short	• Consider shifting trips • Consider policies to hold buses for connections
Connection is too long	• Consider shifting trips • Consider increasing service frequency
No downstream trips	• Consider extending the span of service

When the connection is too short:

- **Consider shifting trips.** Some transit lines may have flexibility in their schedule to shift trips to improve high-priority connections. However, the applicability of this approach depends heavily on what other requirements the schedule needs to meet. Schedule requirements may include making timed connections elsewhere along the route and the fitting each trip between its preceding and following trips (with sufficient layover time to ensure reliability). These constraints can be especially challenging for long or infrequent routes.
- **Consider policies to hold buses for connections.** There is precedent for certain bus routes to hold for Metra connections, ensuring a reliable connection even when the train is delayed. However, such policies can cause cascading delays throughout the rest of the bus schedule. This approach is most applicable when service levels are so low that a missed connection may leave a traveler unable to complete their trip.

When the connection is too long:

- **Consider shifting trips.** Some transit lines may have flexibility in their schedule to shift trips to improve high-priority connections. However, the applicability of this approach depends heavily on what other requirements the schedule needs to meet. Schedule requirements may include making timed connections elsewhere along the route and the slotting of the trip between its preceding and following trips (with sufficient layover time to ensure reliability). These constraints can be especially challenging for long or infrequent routes.
- **Consider increasing service frequency.** If a high-priority connection is missed because it falls between the trips of another route, one solution may be to increase the frequency of that route. A consistent finding of our coordination analysis is that transit lines with more frequent service are more likely to provide convenient connections. Of course, increasing frequency typically requires an investment in additional vehicles and operators, and planners will need to evaluate whether the potential benefit would justify this investment.

When there are no downstream trips:

- **Consider extending the span of service** on the connecting route. As service levels drop during evening and weekend periods, it can be important to coordinate hours of service to ensure that the off-peak network is well coordinated. Of course, extending service span is an investment that planners will need to evaluate holistically.

Summary of Findings

Several key findings were identified from this analysis. Additional statistics about the key transfer locations weekday findings are provided in Table 2.

- Transfer quality is strongest when connecting service is frequent.
- Transfer quality varies throughout the day, especially when spans of service are misaligned.
- The highest rate of acceptable transfers occurs during weekday peak periods, followed by the mid-day period.
- The percent of acceptable transfers drops after 7pm on weekdays, even at locations with high levels of service.
- Late night, owl, and early morning periods have limited service and low transfer quality.
- Across the entire day on weekdays and Saturdays, the most common reason for a non-acceptable transfer is that a connection is too long.
- Several Metra stations do not have bus connections for their first and last arrivals.
- The highest observed Ventra transfer activity is concentrated at major CTA rail transfer points and bus-rail hubs.

Table 2. Key Transfer Location Summary, Weekdays, All-Day Time Period

Location	Service Boards	Routes /Lines	First & Last Service Arrivals	Average Span of Service	Average Trip Arrivals per Hour	Transfer Opportunities	Percent of Opportunities Acceptable
Aurora Metra	Metra Pace	5	4 AM - 2 AM	6 AM - 8 PM	6.8	766	56.1%
Crystal Lake Metra	Metra Pace	4	4 AM - 2 AM	6 AM - 6 PM	2.9	241	18.3%
Elgin Metra	Metra Pace	13	4 AM - 12 AM	6 AM - 7 PM	12.8	4.0K	58.6%
Harlem/Lake Green Line	CTA Metra Pace	7	24 Hour	5 AM - 11 PM	28.6	7.7K	51.5%
Harvey Metra	Metra Pace	11	24 Hour	6 AM - 10 PM	21.4	7.4K	37.9%
Homewood Metra & Amtrak*	Metra Pace	3	5 AM - 2 AM	6 AM - 8 PM	5.6	427	29.7%
Jefferson Park Blue Line & Metra	CTA Metra Pace	15	24 Hour	5 AM - 10 PM	60.8	31.1K	52.4%
Joliet Gateway Center	Metra Pace	13	4 AM - 2 AM	6 AM - 7 PM	7.9	2.2K	42.1%
Naperville Metra	Metra Pace	4	4 AM - 1 AM	7 AM - 7 PM	5.9	494	38.5%
Rosemont Blue Line	CTA Pace	12	24 Hour	5 AM - 10 PM	35.7	10.7K	44.7%
Waukegan Metra	Metra Pace	9	4 AM - 1 AM	6 AM - 7 PM	8.5	2.0K	49.2%

**Amtrak trips were not included in this analysis.*

Transfer quality is strongest where riders connect to frequent services. For the 11 locations studied, connections to CTA rail lines consistently provided the shortest waits and most reliable scheduled transfer opportunities — because when frequency is high enough, riders do not depend as heavily on precise timetable coordination. Rosemont and Harlem/Lake are major outlying hubs that perform well for this reason. These locations demonstrate that strong transfer coordination is not limited to downtown locations. Suburban and outer urban hubs can provide effective regional connections when connecting services operate frequently and consistently throughout the day.

Transfer quality varies throughout the day. Results were generally stronger during weekday peak periods and weaker when connecting routes operate on long headways, have midday gaps in service, short spans of service, or limited operations on weekends. At suburban rail-bus hubs such as Waukegan Metra Station, Aurora Metra Station, and Joliet Gateway Center, late evening and overnight transfer quality degrades significantly due to differences in service span. Some services, including certain Metra lines and commuter focused bus routes, drop to hourly or irregular midday service, which can create long and inconsistent transfer waits, even when service continues to operate. This trend generally continues on Saturdays and Sundays with more limited spans, if service is operated. Riders transferring to these routes may face long waits or look for alternative forms of transportation. In these cases, the issue is less about adjusting schedules and more about the absence of service during key parts of the day.

Long waits should not immediately be interpreted as justification for added service, unless they occur in markets with meaningful transfer demand, or involve routes with significance from the perspective of regional connectivity. While attempts should be made to ensure all routes connect with other services, some routes designed around specialized employer shifts or limited commute markets should be considered separately from broader all-day transfer markets. A strong case for added frequency or span expansion exists where poor scheduled transfer quality overlaps with high observed transfer volumes.

Observed Ventra transfer volumes help identify the connections where schedule quality matters most. The highest observed transfer activity is concentrated at major CTA rail transfer points and bus-rail hubs. The strongest CTA/Pace transfer markets include connections involving the Blue Line and Pace Route 223, the Red Line and Pace Route 352, Pace Route 290 and multiple CTA rail lines, and Pace Pulse Milwaukee and the Blue Line. (Recall that Metra transfers are not captured in the Ventra data.) Coordinating these connections is important because schedule changes at high-volume locations affect more riders. These connections tend to have convenient transfer opportunities when service is frequent during peak periods, but off-peak and weekend connections may be less convenient.

The findings support a targeted approach to schedule coordination that emphasizes locations where many riders transfer but where scheduled waits are relatively long. At locations with less service, it is often challenging to improve schedule coordination without inconveniencing riders elsewhere along the route. At higher-demand locations, service levels are often high enough to ensure convenient transfers. Therefore, the best outcomes will come from prioritizing route pairs and hubs where low transfer quality overlaps with high observed transfer activity. The solutions may range from minor shifting of trips to more resource-intensive service expansions.

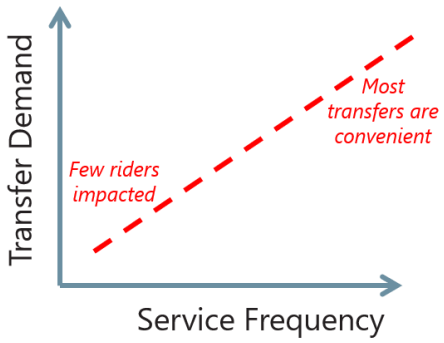

Figure 3. An illustration of the tradeoffs between focusing on less-frequent services (where transfer coordination is often difficult) and focusing on high-demand services (where transfer quality is usually strong)

4. Service Planning Under NITA

PREPARING FOR NITA

As RTA plans for the new service planning processes that will be implemented as part of the NITA transition, there are several initial steps that should be taken to ensure a smooth transition from current processes. Some of these steps involve documenting the current Service Board processes so that NITA can anticipate how its new processes might build on existing processes. Other steps may involve communicating clear expectations for the new process so Service Boards and other stakeholders can prepare for their roles.

First, understanding the current service planning process will be valuable to inform the development of the updated process. NITA should document the following information from all three Service Boards:

- Current service categories and definitions.
- Current service standards applied to the categories. (This could include minimum levels of service as well as service performance targets.)
- Policies and processes for proposed service changes to be evaluated and approved. What changes require Board approval? What constitutes a "major service change" for the purposes of the Title VI review process? When is a public hearing needed? What steps are needed to request operating rights on a street?
- Software systems that are used for service planning and scheduling.
- Systems used to store and access key service planning data such as ridership details, transfer volumes, trip-level schedule adherence, and vehicle location data.
- The current schedule of "picks" or "bids" when service changes may occur. This should specify what factors typically drive the selection of pick dates and the timeline of various steps that are needed in advance of a service change. The timeline may vary depending on requirements for new vehicles, operators, stops, etc.

For each of these items, NITA should consider whether maintaining separate systems and practices is appropriate for the needs of the different Service Boards, or whether aligning some of these systems and practices would be merited to support regional integration. This evaluation and the planning of the new NITA service planning processes should be closely coordinated with CTA, Pace, and Metra.

NITA Requirements

The NITA Act changes the region's transit service planning process by introducing three key features. It requires a regionally coordinated service plan, regional service standards for different types of transit service, and a transit propensity analysis to determine where different services are merited. This section summarizes the new requirements, while also noting key implementation choices that NITA will face.

Regionally Coordinated Service Plan

NITA will be required to lead a Regionally Coordinated Service Plan process each year. The process will create a unified plan for all CTA, Pace, and Metra services in the region, covering a period of one to three years. The first instance of this process will run from December 2027 through December 2028. Key steps in the process are summarized below.

First, NITA will issue a **request for proposed service plans** by December 15, 2027. This request can provide guidance on what NITA would like Service Boards to include in their service plan submittals. NITA may include descriptions of desired service changes based on regional service standards. NITA may also provide revenue estimates for each Service Board, or multiple budget scenarios for Service Boards to address. The request can also call for other information that will help NITA evaluate the service plan proposals.

Service Boards will present **preliminary service proposals** by March 31, 2028. These preliminary proposals will be presented in public hearings and may change based on feedback at this stage of the process.

Service Boards will submit **proposed service plans** to NITA by April 30, 2028. These submittals must address the following topics:

- Specify the location, frequency, days, and hours of service
- Give reasons for any changes from previous service plan
- Identify funding assumptions
- Address requirements for reliability, cleanliness, and safety
- Address requirements for fare systems, customer information, branding, and coordination

Finally, the NITA Board must adopt a **regionwide service plan** by December 31, 2028. After reviewing the Service Boards' proposed service plans, NITA may choose to approve them unchanged or to modify them if they do not meet regional service standards. NITA will notify Service Boards of any deficiencies in their plans or proposed changes that are rejected. The adopted regionwide service plan will compile service plans for each Service Board to form a unified regional plan.

Within the required framework for the Regionally Coordinated Service Plan, there are important choices to make in its implementation. One choice is how prescriptive or flexible the service

standards are in guiding Service Board planning work. Another choice is how the service change approval process might be updated for major and minor changes. Continued collaboration between the Service Boards and NITA should yield solutions that meet the needs of all parties, including transit riders.

Service Standards

Regional service standards must be adopted by the NITA board by the end of 2027. The service standards will identify the appropriate characteristics for each type of transit service in the region. (This could also apply to Metra's typology of stations.) For example, a coverage-focused bus route connecting rural areas should have a different level of service than a crowded urban rail line. For each type of service, the service standards will identify the following factors at minimum:

- Mode
- Vehicle type
- Frequency
- Time span
- Stop spacing
- Coverage
- Vehicle and stop amenities
- Network connectivity
- Route directness
- Route deviation

NITA may go beyond these metrics, and should consider also using revenue hours, revenue miles, passenger miles, and unlinked passenger trips in its standards. This framework leaves NITA with important choices such as how broad or specific the service categories should be, and whether the service requirements should be easily achievable or more ambitious. It may be useful to compare proposed service standards with the current service levels of each service category, so the magnitude of any required investments can be evaluated.

Transit Propensity

NITA must also approve a transit propensity index for the region by the end of 2027. The transit propensity index can be mapped geographically to show how demand for transit service is distributed across the region. The service standards will be linked to transit propensity, such that different types of transit service are appropriate when different transit propensity thresholds are met.

The NITA act requires that the transit propensity index incorporates the following metrics, though additional factors may also be included. The law also calls for weighting of the metrics to generate the overall scoring:

- Population density
- Employment density
- Low-income populations
- Disabled populations

- Zero-car households
- Intersection density
- Presence of sidewalks

It will be important for NITA to establish a well-justified weighting of propensity factors that recognizes the diversity of development patterns throughout the region. The Service Boards have completed similar transit propensity analyses that may be useful for NITA to reference when selecting weightings, to ensure an evenhanded approach.

Special Event Coordination

Major events present opportunities to attract riders and demonstrate the value of a coordinated regional transit network. These large events are a logical market for mass transit, as crowds of people may wish to depart at the same time. The importance of off-peak travel can also be seen in the resiliency of weekend ridership post-COVID: At all three Service Boards, Saturday and Sunday ridership levels have recovered more strongly than weekday ridership. Weekend and recreational travel represent an increasingly important transit market as regional travel patterns have shifted away from peak period commute orientation and toward all-day travel serving diverse trip purposes.

To fully capture these markets, NITA's role in regional transit coordination could include preparations for special events and the temporary service adjustments (such as added service or detours) that occur in response. Within this role, NITA should also coordinate regional marketing and customer communications to ensure riders receive consistent transit information before, during, and after these events. While this discussion focuses on special event planning, NITA's coordination role could also extend to the transit impacts of situations such construction projects or emergencies.

Changes to Special Event Processes

Special event logistics are typically arranged between event organizers and municipal officials responsible for approving events and coordinating services such as police, fire, transportation, and other public services. Currently, public transit may be represented by an individual Service Board, such as CTA in Chicago or Pace Bus in the suburbs. In some cases, transit is overlooked or not included early enough in event preparations, causing operators to discover that route detours, stop relocations, or additional service is needed with little time to prepare.

The Service Boards currently support major events in different ways. CTA often responds to events by deploying extra service on transit lines serving the event venue. Metra may operate additional or special service for major destinations or recurring events such as the Ravinia Festival. Pace operates a series of express routes serving event destinations such as Wrigley Field and Soldier Field from suburban transit centers. While Service Boards regularly respond to large event demand, planning and communications are not consistently coordinated through a single regional process, leaving gaps for events outside of areas typically served by transit.

As RTA transitions to NITA, the agency should become the **primary transit point of contact** for

the region's event organizers, venues, municipalities, counties, and emergency management agencies preparing special events with impacts on transportation and transit. Rather than having separate lines of communication between event organizers and individual Service Boards, NITA should determine which Service Boards are affected and lead development of a coordinated service, operations, marketing, and communications plan.

As part of this process, NITA should develop and maintain a list of regional special events that recur annually. These would include street festivals, professional sporting events, and holiday parades, among other events. NITA can track details such as event dates, estimated attendance, which Service Boards are impacted, and how impacted transit services have been adjusted in the past. This will facilitate proactive planning for the upcoming events. NITA could also develop a standard process and toolkit for special event service planning and operations based on best practices, policies, and local context.

Best Practices & Policies

Many cities and regions approach special events and stadium operations in a comprehensive way, bringing together multiple agencies and functions to ensure services are integrated and communication is clear and transparent. This can sometimes be guided by formal policies or requirements adopted by a policy-making body such as a City Council. Authorities may also be able to mandate well-planned transportation logistics when reviewing event plans or approving the development of event venues.

Policies that seek to increase or maximize transit as an access/egress mode for special events can provide the necessary basis for additional resources or operational actions that make transit more effective. One example in the San Francisco Bay Area is a City policy that seeks to maximize transit mode share for special events at the Chase Center Arena, opened in 2019. The City of San Francisco may close certain streets around the arena to all vehicles except for transit, ensuring uninterrupted operations. These policies can also take the form of a "target" mode share, identifying a policy aspiration that a certain percentage of trips will be undertaken by transit and shifting resources to support the policy.

Crowd management and fares are another avenue where policy can support increased transit ridership for special events. Metra's existing partnership with the Ravinia Festival represents a local example of how this could be applied regionwide. Since 2020, Ravinia Festival concertgoers can present a valid, dated concert ticket as fare for Metra Union Pacific North trains. This enables rapid boarding in the surge after an event has ended. It also encourages fans to choose transit by eliminating the cost and inconvenience of purchasing transit tickets either before or after the event.

For large facilities such as football stadiums, crowd control and management is essential to ensure transit can function properly and efficiently. At Levi's Stadium in Santa Clara, California, the 49ers football team funds gameday operational staff from the local transit operator to manage queues and boarding at the adjacent light rail station and express buses. Crowd management staff also serve as information resources, making it easier and more convenient for fans that are taking transit.

The 2026 FIFA World Cup recently provided additional examples of how transit can effectively serve major events in several American cities. The American Public Transportation Association is developing a summary report that will describe additional best practices based on the experience from these events.

5. Case Studies of Regional Service Planning

Bay Area "Big Sync"

Background

Regional transit planning in the San Francisco Bay Area is overseen by the Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC), which serves as both the region's metropolitan planning organization and regional transportation planning agency.[4] Created in 1970, MTC was established to coordinate transportation planning and funding across the Bay Area's nine counties, a region served by more than two dozen independent transit operators. Unlike regions with a single transit authority, the Bay Area's transit network evolved through the creation of numerous local agencies, including BART, Caltrain, Muni, AC Transit, SamTrans, VTA, and others, each with its own governance structure, funding sources, and service priorities. MTC's role is therefore to provide regional coordination, strategic planning, and funding oversight while allowing individual operators to maintain responsibility for day-to-day service delivery. MTC describes its mission as planning, financing, and coordinating the Bay Area's transportation systems, including public transit, highways, and other transportation infrastructure.

In recent years, the Bay Area has increasingly focused on improving coordination among its fragmented transit operators. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated concerns about system efficiency, ridership recovery, and customer experience, leading MTC to launch the Transit Transformation Action Plan in 2021.[5] This initiative sought to create a more connected, customer-focused regional transit network by improving fare integration, schedule coordination, wayfinding, and service planning across operators. Rather than consolidating agencies under a single authority, the Bay Area has pursued a model of regional network management in which MTC serves as a coordinator and convener, encouraging operators to work together while retaining their institutional autonomy.

Regional Planning and Coordination

MTC conducts regional planning through a collaborative governance framework that brings together transit operators, county transportation agencies, local governments, and state and federal partners. Because the Bay Area's 27 transit operators remain independent organizations, regional planning relies heavily on partnership and consensus-building rather than direct authority. Through long-range plans such as Plan Bay Area 2050+[6] and initiatives such as the Transit Transformation Action Plan, MTC establishes regional priorities and coordinates investments intended to improve mobility across agency boundaries. The agency also

[4] Source: MTC About MTC | Metropolitan Transportation Commission
[5] Source: MTC https://mtc.ca.gov/news/bay-area-transits-latest-big-sync-improves-transfers-saving-riders-20-minutes-trip
[6] Source: MTC Plan Bay Area 2050+ https://planbayarea.org/sites/default/files/documents/2026-04/Final_Plan_Bay_Area_2050_Plus_0.pdf?cb=5213b6c9

administers significant state and federal transportation funding, providing an important mechanism for encouraging regional cooperation and alignment with broader transportation goals.

A key development has been the emergence of Regional Network Management (RNM),[7] a framework adopted in 2023 designed to formalize ongoing coordination between MTC and transit operators. Its stated mission is "to drive transformative improvements in the customer experience for regional Bay Area transit." The RNM model focuses on several aspects of the transit system, including fare integration, wayfinding, accessibility, and overall transit and connected network planning. Rather than replacing local operators, the model seeks to make the network function more seamlessly from the rider's perspective. Regional coordination efforts are supported by the RNM Council, which is composed of GM-level operators and MTC representatives who understand transit operations and can represent their agencies. The Council has regular meetings as well as collaborative working groups focused on specific operational improvements.

Service Planning and Scheduling Processes

The Bay Area's approach to scheduling is exemplified by the "Big Sync" initiative,[8] a region-wide effort to coordinate service changes among multiple transit agencies. Under this program, transit operators simultaneously adjust schedules to improve transfer reliability at key regional hubs. The initiative is part of the broader implementation of the Transit Transformation Action Plan and represents one of the first systematic attempts to coordinate schedules across the region's independently operated transit systems. The third iteration of the Big Sync, implemented in 2025, focused on synchronizing bus and rail schedules at major transfer locations throughout the Bay Area, with some riders experiencing travel time savings of up to 20 minutes[9] due to improved connections.

The scheduling process itself is highly collaborative. MTC does not directly create transit schedules. Instead, individual operators retain responsibility for designing and operating their services. Through the Big Sync process, agencies jointly identify transfer locations where coordinated schedules can significantly improve passenger connections. Operators then modify their schedules within their own systems to better align arrivals and departures with connecting services. Examples include adjustments to SamTrans routes to improve connections with Caltrain and schedule changes at major hubs such as Daly City BART and Palo Alto Transit Center.[10] These coordinated changes are developed through ongoing discussions among operators and regional planners and are intended to enhance network performance without requiring major

[7] Source: MTC 15a: MTC Resolution No. 4564 Regional Network Management Framework Recommendations
[8] Source: BART https://www.bart.gov/news/articles/2025/news20250116
[9] Source: BART Bay Area transit's latest Big Sync improves transfers, saving riders up to 20 minutes per trip | Bay Area Rapid Transit
[10] Source: SamTrans https://www.samtrans.com/blog/2025/08/big-sync-how-samtrans-teaming-improve-transit-transfers-peninsula

structural changes to agency governance.

In June 2026, RTA and Service Board staff met with service planning staff at the Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority (VTA), one of the transit operators serving the Bay Area involved in the Big Sync. In this meeting, VTA staff shared their experience with the process, as well as lessons learned and best practices. Principles that underpinned the success of the Big Sync included:

- **Aligning signup (Bid) calendars across agencies**. Notably, this didn't require every agency to make all changes at the same time. It established "major" sign up windows in January and August, and encouraged agencies to align with these, while allowing them to maintain "minor" windows beyond these two.
- **Share service plans early, and discuss service coordination regularly.**
- **Coordinate outward from core services.** This established a shared understanding of the hierarchy of services, first solidifying schedules on major, regionally significant services, and publicizing these schedules so more localized services can plan their services around connections to the major services.
- **Prioritize hubs and manage expectations.** This recognized that every connection can't be accommodated and explicitly prioritized the locations where the most opportunity for connections existed.
- **Implement and communicate together.**

The Bay Area model demonstrates how regional planning can be achieved in a highly decentralized environment. Rather than relying on a single authority to dictate service plans, MTC uses strategic planning, funding incentives, and collaborative network management to encourage coordination among independent operators. Initiatives such as the Big Sync, regional fare integration through Clipper, and the RNM framework illustrate a gradual shift toward a more unified transit network while preserving local control over transit operations.

MONTREAL ARTM

Background

The Autorité régionale de transport métropolitain (ARTM) was established in 2017 as part of a major reform of metropolitan transportation governance in the Montréal region.[11] It replaced the planning responsibilities previously held by the Agence métropolitaine de transport (AMT),[12] which had been created in 1995 to coordinate and promote public transportation across the metropolitan area. Although the AMT was responsible for regional planning, it lacked the authority and institutional tools needed to fully implement its plans. The creation of the ARTM was intended to address this limitation by separating planning from operations and

[11]This section is informed in part by a governance discussion between RTA and ARTM held on May 11th, 2026.
[12] https://www.stm.info/en/about/corporate-governance/autorite-regionale-de-transport-metropolitain-artm

consolidating regional decision-making under a single authority. Inspired by transportation governance models used in Paris and compliant with EU requirements, the ARTM was designed to provide stronger regional coordination through the replacement of four municipal planning agencies with one regional planning agency. This agency is also responsible for implementing integrated fare policies and providing a unified strategic vision for transit across the Montréal metropolitan area.

Regional Planning and Coordination

As part of its adoption, ARTM centralized planning responsibilities within a single regional agency while leaving service delivery to operating agencies such as Exo, the Société de transport de Montréal (STM), the Société de transport de Laval (STL), the Réseau de transport de Longueuil (RTL), and the Réseau express métropolitain (REM). This restructuring was intended to overcome fragmented decision-making, facilitate regional transit investments, support the implementation of major projects, and create a more integrated transit network across municipal boundaries.

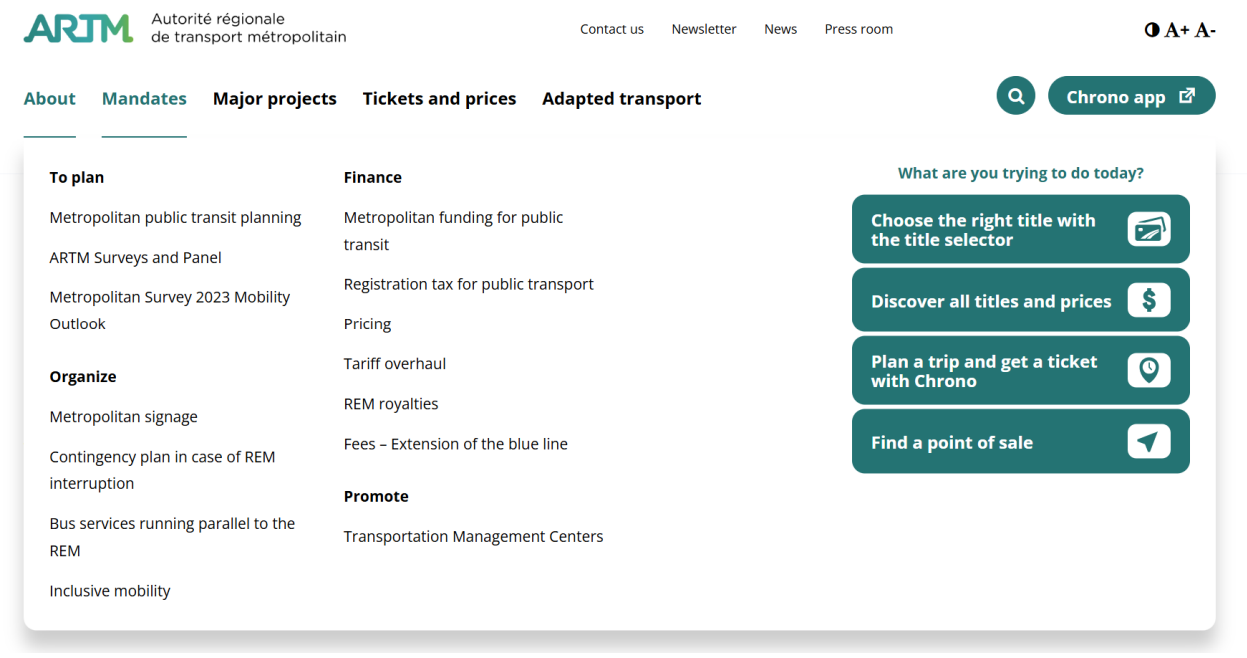

Figure 4. ARTM's Mandate. Source: ARTM

The transition to this governance model presented several challenges. Operating agencies were often reluctant to relinquish planning authority or participate in the new contractual framework. Historical territorial boundaries and institutional "turf" created friction, requiring significant relationship-building and, in some cases, intervention from provincial leadership. ARTM staff emphasized that meeting individually with operators rather than engaging them collectively helped build trust and identify specific operational concerns. Over time, the agency strengthened its role by leading collaborative initiatives, including a coalition to increase post-

pandemic transportation funding. These efforts demonstrated the value of regional coordination and helped build support among operators.

Service Planning and Scheduling Processes

The ARTM's service planning process is structured around contractual agreements with transit operators. Rather than directly designing every route and schedule, the ARTM establishes service requirements, performance expectations, and funding levels, while operators develop the detailed service plans needed to meet those requirements. The process begins with transit operators identifying their anticipated funding needs and service proposals. The ARTM then assesses available revenues and determines how much funding can be allocated. This initiates an iterative negotiation process in which service levels, funding availability, and operational constraints are reconciled. Should there be gaps in the services funded versus those desired by the municipality, municipalities are responsible for closing the gap.

The service planning process is intended to improve accountability and performance by clearly defining service expectations and associated performance measures. In principle, the framework also creates opportunities for comparison and competition among operators by evaluating outcomes against common standards.

Through this combination of regional planning and contractual service requirements, the ARTM coordinates transit services across the Montréal metropolitan region while allowing operators to retain responsibility for day-to-day scheduling and operations.

SWISS FEDERAL OFFICE OF TRANSPORT

Background

The Swiss Federal Office of Transport (FOT) is the national government agency responsible for overseeing Switzerland's railways, public transportation system, freight transport, and transportation infrastructure. Operating under the Federal Department of the Environment, Transport, Energy and Communications (DETEC), the FOT was established to ensure that transportation services are coordinated efficiently across the country and aligned with national mobility objectives. Rather than directly operating transit services, the FOT provides strategic oversight, regulatory supervision, and funding coordination for transportation providers.[13]

The FOT was designed to address the need for a highly integrated transportation network across a country with numerous transit operators and multiple levels of government. As public transportation demand grew and rail became a central component of Swiss mobility policy, national coordination became essential to ensure seamless connections, efficient investment decisions, and consistent service standards. The agency therefore plays a key role in implementing transportation projects commissioned by the Federal Council and Parliament, issuing permits, overseeing federally funded projects, and monitoring compliance with approved

[13] Source: Swiss Federal Office of Transport https://www.uvek.admin.ch/en/federal-office-of-transport-fot

budgets and schedules. Through these responsibilities, the FOT helps ensure that transportation investments support a coherent national network rather than a collection of disconnected local systems.

Regional Planning and Coordination

Regional planning in Switzerland is built around a collaborative governance model that requires transportation providers and government agencies to coordinate their decisions. Transit fares, schedules, service planning, and capital investments are coordinated at both the regional and national levels through formal institutions and partnerships.[14] Coordination is mandatory, but it is achieved through negotiation and consensus-building rather than top-down directives. Policy is developed through an iterative process involving operators, cantons, regional transport associations, and federal agencies, with the objective of optimizing the performance of the overall network rather than individual services.

The FOT serves as the principal federal coordinator within this framework. Its responsibilities focus on nationally and regionally significant transportation services rather than local transit operations. The agency establishes long-term goals, oversees major infrastructure investments, and ensures that transportation providers align with broader network objectives.

Service Planning and Scheduling Processes

The FOT plays a particularly important role in Switzerland's nationally integrated timetable system, commonly known as the "clock-face" timetable. Under this system, trains and connecting transit services operate according to repeating schedules, with departures and arrivals occurring at the same minutes past each hour throughout the day. Rather than designing schedules independently, regional and interregional operators are required to coordinate their timetables with the national schedule prepared by the FOT, ensuring that service changes in one area do not undermine connections elsewhere in the network.[15] The result is coordinated transfer points where passengers can reliably connect between trains, buses, trams, and other modes. Infrastructure investments and service changes are evaluated based on their ability to improve these network connections.

This approach is designed to maximize connectivity and minimize transfer times across the entire transportation network. Because the effectiveness of the system depends on precise coordination among operators and regions, timetable compliance is closely monitored. The FOT also oversees federally funded projects to ensure they remain on schedule and within budget while supporting broader transportation objectives.

[14] Source: 2023 Study Delegation of San Francisco Bay Area Transit Professionals to Switzerland Joint Final Report, MTC 2023-11-21 Swiss Study Tour Joint Report - text

[15] Source: Seamless Bay Area https://www.seamlessbayarea.org/blog/2022/2/21/one-journey-one-ticket-summary-of-day-1-of-the-swisscal-conference

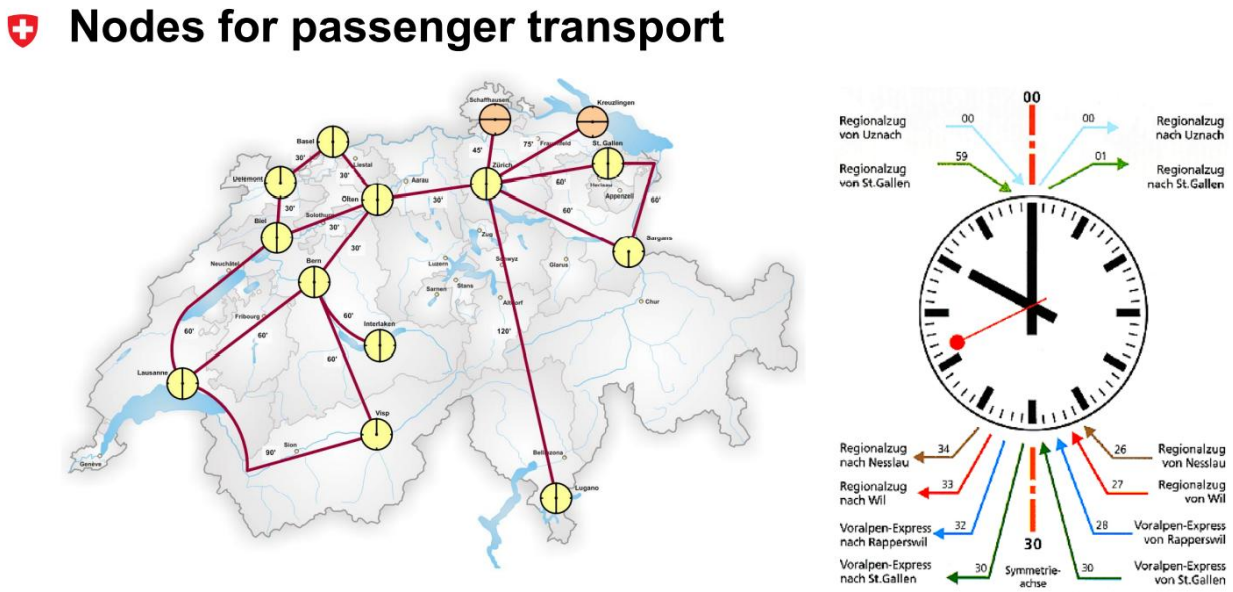

Figure 5. Illustration of Clockface Scheduling System. Source: FOT

The FOT oversees major timetable changes, infrastructure investments, and strategic service adjustments that affect network-wide operations, particularly when federal funding is involved. It also monitors project implementation, budgets, and timelines for major transportation initiatives. Rather than approving individual local service plans, the FOT ensures that regional services and infrastructure investments contribute to the performance of the national network.

Toronto Metrolinx

Background

Metrolinx is the regional transportation agency for the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area (GTHA), established by the Province of Ontario in 2006 to address growing transportation challenges across one of Canada's fastest-growing metropolitan regions.[16] Prior to its creation through the Metrolinx Act,[17] transit planning and service delivery were highly fragmented among municipal transit agencies, with limited coordination of regional services, fares, and infrastructure investments. The provincial government created Metrolinx to provide a unified regional vision for transportation, improve connectivity across municipal boundaries, and coordinate major transit investments throughout the region. Over time, Metrolinx assumed responsibility for several key regional transportation functions, including ownership and operation of GO Transit,[18] management of the UP Express airport rail service,[19] and

[16] Source: Metrolinx Metrolinx | Creating Possibilities
[17] Source: Province of Ontario. *Metrolinx Act, 2006* *Metrolinx Act, 2006, S.O. 2006, c. 16 | ontario.ca*
[18] Source: GO Transit GO Transit | Regional Public Transit Service for the GTHA
[19] Source: UP Express UP Express | Pearson Airport to Downtown Toronto in 28 minutes

administration of the PRESTO fare payment system.[20]

While local transit agencies, such as the Toronto Transit Commission (TTC), MiWay, and Brampton Transit, among others, continue to operate local services, Metrolinx provides regional leadership through long-range planning, major capital project delivery, regional fare integration, and operation of regional rail and bus services. The organization also serves as the primary provincial vehicle for delivering large-scale transit expansion projects, such as the GO Expansion.[21] Metrolinx's dual role of collaborative planning agency and service operator provides greater control over regional transportation outcomes than several peer agencies.

Regional Planning and Coordination

Metrolinx conducts regional transportation planning through a combination of strategic planning, infrastructure investment, and operational coordination. The *2041 Regional Transportation Plan*[22] establishes long-term goals for mobility, land use integration, sustainability, and economic development across the GTHA. The plan focuses on enhancing the user experience, setting aggressive goals for increased transit ridership with anticipated regional population growth.

Through PRESTO, Metrolinx has created a unified fare payment platform used by most transit agencies in the region, helping to simplify travel across municipal boundaries. PRESTO also works with local operators to coordinate fares, ridership data, service planning, and infrastructure investments. The PRESTO Service Design Standard[23] establishes common requirements for fare collection technology, customer experience, payment processing, and data management across participating transit agencies. By standardizing these elements, Metrolinx creates a consistent user experience while enabling agencies to maintain their own fare structures and operating practices.

Service Planning and Scheduling Processes

Compared with ARTM or the FOT, Metrolinx's service planning process differs from many regional planning organizations because it directly operates regional transit services through GO Transit and UP Express. As a result, the agency is responsible not only for establishing regional transportation priorities but also for designing, scheduling, and operating the services that form the backbone of regional travel in the GTHA. Service planning is driven by regional travel demand, ridership analysis, infrastructure capacity, and long-term policy objectives. Through GO Transit, Metrolinx coordinates rail and bus services across a network that connects municipalities throughout the region, providing commuter and increasingly all-day regional travel options.

Scheduling is designed to support connectivity both within the GO network and with local transit services. Timetables are developed centrally by Metrolinx and coordinated with municipal

[20] Source: PRESTO PRESTO
[21] Source: Metrolinx GO Expansion
[22] Source: 2041 Regional Transportation Plan Metrolinx_-_2041_Regional_Transportation_Plan_Print_-_EDIT_to6erf.pdf
[23] Source: Metrolinx *PRESTO Service Design Standard* October 2025 PRESTO Service Design Standard

transit agencies to facilitate transfers at major mobility hubs, including Union Station and regional transit terminals. Metrolinx also uses PRESTO data, ridership analytics, and regional travel forecasting to inform service planning decisions and evaluate network performance.

The ongoing GO Expansion program is reshaping service planning by transitioning much of the GO rail network from a traditional commuter-focused model toward a frequent regional rail system with all-day, two-way service. This shift requires close integration between infrastructure planning, operations, and scheduling to ensure that service frequencies, train movements, and station operations support a more seamless regional transit network.

6. Summary

The transit service planning process in the northeast Illinois region is about to change due to the Northern Illinois Transit Authority Act. This report first summarized the existing service planning process to establish the baseline conditions. CTA, Pace, and Metra already coordinate with each other through regular meetings and special initiatives. Each of the Service Boards also have network planning projects underway that are generally advancing similar priorities. To increase collaboration between Service Boards in the near term, there may be opportunities for increased information sharing, collaborative planning efforts, and more unified public communications.

This report included a technical analysis of scheduled transfer quality to help understand where/when there may be opportunities to improve interagency connections. In addition to analyzing schedule data, this considered the volume of observed Ventra transfers between transit lines to help prioritize the connections that are most used. A toolbox of potential solutions was provided to address different types of schedule coordination issues.

Service planning under NITA will change with the creation of three new structures: a regional Transit Propensity Index, Service Standards, and a Regionally Coordinated Service Plan. The report summarized the requirements of each of these structures and noted areas where NITA faces choices in implementation. It also identified some near-term steps that could be taken to prepare for the new process by documenting existing Service Board processes.

Finally, the case studies of the Bay Area's Big Sync, Montreal's ARTM, the Swiss Federal Office of Transport, and Toronto's Metrolinx provide useful insights into how other regional transit bodies guide the process of transit service planning and coordination. While no example matches the exact structure of NITA, it may be worth considering whether some elements from the case studies could be replicated in northeastern Illinois.