

2025 State Legislative Agenda

Chicago's regional transit system is at a pivot point that requires bold legislative action in 2025. Temporary federal support for transit operations, which has been sustaining transit service since the start of the pandemic, will be depleted in early 2026, leaving an annual budget gap of more than \$730 million and growing to sustain existing levels of service. This gap is the result of historic underfunding and changes in travel patterns given the growth of remote and hybrid work post-pandemic.

Now, the legislature can capitalize on recent momentum of post-pandemic ridership growth to increase state investment in transit service, leading to cleaner air, a stronger regional economy, and enhanced quality of life for all residents. Or, if the legislature fails to act, the system will be forced off a fiscal cliff and service will be cut, resulting in inequitable impacts on residents, more congestion, more pollution, and limited economic growth.

Building off the region's transit strategic plan, [Transit is the Answer](#), this legislative agenda focuses on securing the funds needed to improve the frequency and reliability of transit service across the region while implementing the reforms necessary to increase accountability and efficiency systemwide. The RTA is also advocating for reforming statewide transportation policy in ways that incentivize transit use and reduce emissions.

Policy Priorities

Fully fund the region's transit system.

Chicago's regional transit system is chronically underfunded and has gone through a series of service cuts, budget efficiencies, and fare increases since the 1990s. As the pandemic exposed, state operating funding levels are not sufficient to maintain the current system, limiting operators' ability to deliver equitable and efficient transit service across the region and adapt to changing mobility patterns.

The RTA will lead the conversation with lawmakers to secure additional operations funding for transit and explain the impacts of different investment levels on the 8.5 million residents of the six-county region.

The RTA advocates for the State of Illinois to:

- Increase funding for transit operations to fill the projected 20% budget gap with new, sustainable revenue without any intermediate service cuts.
 - The structural 20% deficit – currently projected at \$730 million - is projected to grow each year as expenses increase.
 - Filling the structural gap and allowing the system to avoid severe cuts and dramatic fare increases and return to 2019 service levels is just a start. Riders and communities across the region strongly support more significant



investments in the regional network.

- Ultimately, increase annual operating funding by at least \$1.5 billion a year from current levels to realize expanded and improved service consistent with regional priorities.

The immediate cliff is focused on operations. However, the state also partially funds the capital costs of building and maintaining the system. Recent federal and state capital legislation has made a big impact in addressing state of good repair needs, but we need more sustainable and predictable capital funding to maintain state of good repair and expand and rebuild facilities for the future. The RTA advocates for the State of Illinois to:

- Increase levels of sustainable capital funding to meet transit's infrastructure needs of \$3.5 billion per year over the next 10 years, with a focus on additional PAYGO funds to address system maintenance and improve speed and reliability.

Develop a funding structure that is less reliant on rider fares and more focused on equity and access.

Raising funding levels alone won't solve transit's problem – there must be structural shifts to how transit is funded. The state-mandated recovery ratio of 50 percent—the highest requirement of its kind nationally—limits transit's ability to provide equitable service and collaborate.

The RTA advocates for the State of Illinois to:

- Eliminate the state-mandated 50% recovery ratio requirement and its associated financial penalties; transition recovery ratio to one of [several performance metrics](#).
- Expand an equitable regional fare policy that includes fully funded free-and-reduced fare programs, estimated at \$150 million annually, and ADA Paratransit service, estimated at \$250 million annually. These \$400 million in new funds would cover the cost of existing, state-mandated programs, but more funding is needed to avoid service cuts and maintain current service levels, let alone increase service to levels communities are seeking.

Reform transit governance to establish a stronger RTA that improves service and accountability for riders and taxpayers.

The RTA is advocating for new operations funding to come with reforms that would establish a stronger RTA that directly interacts with riders to address their day-to-day issues and has more influence on service, fare policy, and capital project prioritization. These are areas featured in RTA's *Transit is the Answer* strategic plan where the RTA's regional perspective and budgetary role could add value for riders and taxpayers. They are also featured in CMAP's *Plan of Action for Regional Transit*, which recommends a stronger RTA focused on systemwide planning, policy, and funding, allowing the Service Boards to focus on operational excellence.

The RTA advocates for the State of Illinois to:

- **Establish RTA as a rider hub for fares and customer service at the regional level to ensure all riders have access to simple, easy to understand fares and fare programs.** The RTA is well positioned for this role given the agency's responsibility overseeing the regional operating budget, where fares are a critical component. Over the long-term, centralizing fare technologies and vendor relationships will provide more data to plan service standards, prioritize capital



projects and increase responsiveness of critical technologies and services.

- **Direct a strengthened RTA to set regional service standards with policies and mechanisms in place to monitor and enforce compliance from operators.** RTA can use a regional lens to evaluate existing transit services and identify areas where improvement is needed, allowing everyone in the region to better understand the frequency and scope of transit that should be available in their communities. Leaders from each of the Service Boards would present quarterly to the RTA board with updates on service delivery, schedule coordination, and how they are meeting the region's agreed upon service standards, with the RTA Board having the ability to monitor and enforce compliance on an ongoing basis.
- **Empower RTA with greater responsibility for regional planning and capital project prioritization.** RTA can monitor the state of good repair of transit assets systemwide as a combined portfolio and track regional investment needs. RTA can partner with the Service Boards and roadway agencies to lead planning for major regional transit and transportation projects, including roadways with the potential for increased transit use.

Reform how the State plans, evaluates, and prioritizes transportation projects to reduce emissions and advance racial equity.

Transit is one of the most sustainable modes of travel, and the system is one of the strongest tools our region has in the fight against climate change. Transit accounts for just 2 percent of the region's transportation emissions, while cars and trucks account for 59 percent. Statewide, Illinois spends more than \$4.6 billion annually on highway and road investments compared to \$1.3 billion on transit. This disparity continues to increase emissions and further entrenches a car-centric mobility network. Lawmakers should enact policies that continue to drive ridership growth and reduce single-occupancy vehicles on the road, which will reduce regional emissions and congestion.

The RTA advocates for the State of Illinois to:

- Set statewide and regional greenhouse gas emissions targets for the transportation sector and reform project evaluation processes to prioritize projects that reduce emissions, particularly in environmental justice communities.
- Evaluate and reform how the state spends federal transportation resources to support public transit systems, including flexing highway funds to transit.
- Evaluate and reform road system user fees including tolling, parking, and vehicle registration to support transit and reduce single-occupancy vehicle trips.
- Provide additional capital funding and explore innovative purchase-agreements to accelerate the transition to a zero-emission bus network. CTA and Pace are both committed to fully electrifying their bus fleets by 2040.

Strengthen partnerships and investment to enhance personal safety and security on public transit.

All riders and frontline workers deserve to feel safe on public transit. Rates of violent crime occurring on buses and trains are decreasing but there is much more work to do. A multi-faceted approach including additional police and social services personnel on the system is needed. RTA is ready to help lead and collaborate on security strategy and investment with the Service Boards and local municipal and county officials.



The RTA advocates for the State of Illinois to:

- Partner with transit agencies and local municipal and county officials to **increase law enforcement presence on the system.**
- Partner with transit agencies and local municipal and county officials to **increase social services presence on the system.**
- Help advance a multi-layered approach to improving personal safety and security across the system, including strategies identified at RTA's [2024 Safety and Security Summit](#) in the following areas:
 - Enhance personal security for transit riders and workers and address perception of crime on transit.
 - Incorporate transit-specific strategies into social services initiatives.
 - Create safer, more welcoming environments in transit stations and stops.

Join the *Transit is the Answer* Coalition

None of the challenges facing our regional transit system can be solved by one agency alone. RTA launched the *Transit is the Answer* Coalition to continue to expand our partnerships with everyone who values public transit. More than 100 riders, stakeholders, advocates, and agency leaders come together in quarterly virtual meetings to pursue strategies for strengthening the transit system and make it more useful for all residents. If you or your organization would like to sign on to be part of the coalition to support and advocate for transit's future in northeast Illinois, [please visit transitistheanswer.org](https://transitistheanswer.org).

About the Regional Transportation Authority (RTA)

The Regional Transportation Authority (RTA) was created by the Illinois General Assembly to work with CTA, Metra, and Pace to plan, coordinate, oversee, and advocate for transit in Northeastern Illinois. The agency recently adopted a five-year transit strategic plan, *Transit is the Answer*, which is available at rtachicago.org and transitistheanswer.org.

