

# THE BOONE COUNTY JOURNAL

*real journalism for a real democracy*

--In Our Opinion--

## About To Be Railroaded

Chuck Sweeney, the late *Rockford Register Star* columnist, cautioned his readers that if they wanted Metra service to Rockford, they better be prepared to pay the taxes levied by the Chicago-area Regional Transportation Authority. We agree.

Fifty years ago, the RTA was formed after a six-county referendum in 1974. The referendum to create the RTA was heavily favored in Chicago, but bitterly opposed in each of the “collar” counties, particularly in McHenry. The RTA is an umbrella organization that funds three others: The CTA, Metra, and Pace.

At the time, public transit in the area was a mess. The Chicago Transit Authority was broke (as always), several of the commuter railroads were falling apart, and many of the others were threatening large fare increases or to discontinue service. When the RTA was formed, it was given the power to levy sales taxes in six northeast Illinois counties. Currently that tax is 3/4 percent in the collar counties, and 1-1/4 percent in Cook County.

To its credit, the RTA has stabilized public transportation service in Northeast Illinois. The CTA continues to operate a comprehensive bus and rapid transit system and has extended rail service to both Midway and O’Hare Airports (notwithstanding their ridiculous \$3+ billion project to extend the Red Line, duplicating existing, parallel Metra service that’s a mile away). Pace operates good suburban bus service in much of the RTA service area, although there is little-to-non-existent Pace bus service in most of McHenry County.

Metra was formed, trains have been refurbished, lines have been rebuilt, and, in some cases, extended. Metra’s charter is to provide rail service in its territory, period. Except for legacy service to Kenosha, that currently restricts Metra to six Northeastern Illinois counties, unless the RTA’s service and taxing district is expanded.

Over the ensuing decades, there have been financial crises and restructurings of the RTA and its constituent agencies. Covid has caused yet another. Public transit ridership plummeted during the pandemic and has not completely recovered. The RTA has been surviving on a massive federal subsidy that is about to end. It is estimated that the annual shortfall in the operating budget

will be \$700 million annually, starting next year. The Illinois General Assembly is looking for solutions. Expect the RTA sales tax or another tax to increase.

### **Metra comes to Rockford**

Against this backdrop, a glitzy announcement was made that two Metra trains will start serving Rockford in 2027 on a daily basis. A Metra train was brought to Downtown Rockford to provide a backdrop for politicians to announce this great accomplishment for Rockford. Belvidere, Huntley, and Elgin would also see stops in their communities. Better yet, it would all be paid for by the State of Illinois. There were grand justifications offered for this, chiefly because Rockford was allegedly the only major city in Illinois without rail service. (No mention that it was also the only downstate city to have tollways instead of freeways.) A third of a billion dollars will be spent by the state to improve the private property of the profitable Union Pacific Railroad. This largesse would bring the line up to snuff for passenger service.

### **Why this time is different**

Let’s point out the obvious. In the past, initiatives to bring Amtrak or other rail service to Rockford have failed. That’s because Rockford lacks the clout to make it happen. This time, it is Chicago-based Metra that wants to provide the service. Rockford and Belvidere’s choo-choo fantasies just happen to coincide with Metra’s agenda. That greatly raises the possibility that it will come to fruition.

### **No feasibility study**

There have been grand, conclusory proclamations of a marketing nature about this project but little in the way of details, specifically a long-term plan to cover the operating costs.

At a recent public meeting (billed as an informational session, but more about marketing the idea), we innocuously asked Illinois Department of Transportation officials present for a copy of the feasibility study for this proposed service. Had federal funds been involved, such a study would be required. Similarly, in the private sector, no bank would lend money to such a venture without a business plan.

We were shocked to be told that there was no feasibility

ity study. We were told that it “wasn’t necessary,” notwithstanding a contemplated state expenditure of over \$300 million.”

Apparently, no one has prepared a formal analysis of who would ride such a train, what the hypothetical schedule would look like, and whether that schedule would meet the needs of those would-be riders. No formal budget has been proposed, there was no idea of what a ticket would cost or how the operating costs of the train would be covered. We have since learned that the State of Illinois plans to guarantee any operating cost shortfalls, but only for the first five years. After that, someone else would have to pay the cost of operating the train. All that could be said about operations was that Metra would operate the train on the state’s behalf.

### **Connecting the dots**

Linking this project to Metra’s financial situation and its desire to attract more riders led us to some conclusions:

- Two express trains would operate between Downtown Elgin and Chicago’s Union Station. If timed properly, it would be a popular train for Chicago-bound commuters in the Elgin area. Nonstop service would save considerable time for Elgin riders used to riding trains that now make many stops on the way Downtown. Metra could be assured that the train would arrive Downtown full each morning. This would relieve pressure on other trains and might even attract new Elgin riders. The reverse would be true in the evening.

- In this plan, all Metra would need to do is to extend their new Elgin express service to Rockford. As the crews were already on board and the equipment in place, the variable cost of continuing the train to Rockford would be relatively low. Even if no one rode the two trains west of Elgin, a .75% sales tax collected for Metra in Boone and Winnebago Counties would more than compensate Metra for the expense. It might not close Metra’s funding deficit, but it certainly would help.

***That, dear readers, is the missing feasibility study. The plan is not to collect the money on the train, but at the stores lining Perryville Road in Winnebago County!***

### **Is that all bad?**

We don’t necessarily oppose adding Boone and Winnebago to the RTA service area and taxing district. A portion of the tax would, no doubt, be earmarked for the Rockford Mass Transit District (RMTD) to provide local bus service in Rockford. But, before we go levying additional taxes on the people of Boone and Winnebago

County, we would like to see something worthwhile for our money.

### **Trouble from the start**

The Belvidere City Council, totally unprepared to make such decisions, decided they definitely wanted a station downtown, rather than at a more accessible park-and-ride location. The Council’s principal concern seemed to be that the station “look old fashioned.”

Because of the way the Rockford Region is settled, the vast majority of Winnebago County riders would find a Belvidere station more convenient than one on the southwest side of Downtown Rockford. They may also be reluctant to leave cars in Downtown Rockford for security reasons. If the train service were at all successful, we assume this would mean at least fifty daily riders and, correspondingly, about fifty extra cars parked in Downtown Belvidere. Apart from increased traffic, it would mean competition for parking spaces between train riders, local residents, and those patronizing local businesses.

We ask how depositing all of these extra cars in Downtown Belvidere would help the city. Do Belviderians really want parking meters or time restrictions placed on downtown parking?

A train in Belvidere will do *nothing* to increase business in the downtown area. Commuters get off a train, go to their cars, and drive home. There are no self-important businessmen making deals in fancy restaurants or ladies clutching their parasols, browsing the local streets in search of quaint little shops. The experiences of dozens of sophisticated Chicago suburbs as well as suburbs nationwide conclusively prove this point.

The idea of transit-oriented, upscale housing in Downtown Belvidere (or Downtown Rockford) is even more risible. How many people are going to endure a two-hour commute each way instead of living in a more convenient location, closer to Chicago? Even by New York standards, Belvidere is too far from Chicago for that to happen.

It’s time to stop embracing such fantasies.

### **Trouble at the destination**

Belvidere and Rockford need public transit to O’Hare and ChicagoLAND, not Union Station. Union Station is inconvenient and does not connect to CTA Rapid Transit. There is no service from there to O’Hare that doesn’t involve carrying luggage for several blocks outdoors. There is no direct bus or el service to Wrigley Field, McCormick Place, the Museum Campus, or many other Chicago destinations. Never mind popular destinations

in the suburbs. Frankly, in too many cases, driving to one's destination--or at least a more convenient transfer point--makes more sense than a train to Union Station, especially if there is more than one person in the car.

### **An inconvenient schedule**

Twice-daily service to Downtown Chicago is not going to serve the transportation needs of Rockford and Belvidere. Such a schedule offers no flexibility and won't work for most travelers. To compare, there are 14 trains daily from Harvard/Woodstock and yet the timetable is often inconvenient. Similarly sized South Bend, Indiana, a similar distance from Chicago as Rockford, sees 6 daily trains to Chicago's Millennium Station, plus an Amtrak train. Kenosha, about the same distance as Belvidere, has 10 trains daily to Chicago. A proposal to extend Metra to DeKalb envisions 23 trains. It is not uncommon for Harvardites to use the Crystal Lake Station and Kenosha residents to use the Waukegan Station to take advantage of more robust schedules.

### **We have offered an alternative**

As we have stated, we believe that Belvidere and Rockford need public transit to O'Hare and the Chicago area. But instead of a route that does not serve O'Hare as well as so much of both Chicago and Chicagoland, we believe bus rapid transit (BRT) along I-90 would be a better solution. We could save hundreds of millions of dollars and offer far more frequent, better service. And we suspect the running time for a bus on I-90 would be faster than a train running along an urbanized route full of grade crossings.

Nearly all of the infrastructure for a BRT line has already been built. We think stops at the existing bus terminal on Lyford Road and at the Belvidere Oasis would provide better service locally. These buses can serve the existing BRT station in Hoffman Estates and the CTA Blue Line Station in Rosemont. At Rosemont, it is a three-minute transfer to trains that are 8 minutes from the terminal at O'Hare. Taking the Blue Line trains in the opposite direction, one arrives along Dearborn Street in Chicago's Loop. The Blue Line has a direct connection to every other CTA Rapid Transit line. Also at Rosemont is a plethora of Pace buses that offer unmatched connectivity to the North, Northwest, and Western Suburbs.

With a bus instead of a train, more frequent, perhaps hourly, service could be offered. RMTD could provide bus service without the need to join the Chicago RTA.

Would you rather take a bus to where you want to go or take a train to where you don't want to go?

We've offered proof of this concept. A similar service works well in Kankakee at \$2 per ride to Chicago. Pace

already runs BRT services successfully along I-90. The South Suburbs of Minneapolis have a similar BRT service along a freeway to Mall of America. From there, light rail takes passengers to Minneapolis, St. Paul, and the Twin Cities Airport. Each of these services runs frequently and did not cost hundreds of millions of dollars to construct. Most of them offer reclining leather seats with free Wi-Fi. There are many other successful examples worldwide.

But will anyone listen to what we are saying? Of course not. The Rockford poohbahs and their glee club are chanting "We want a choo-choo." Under the circumstances, Metra is only too happy to provide one.

### ***And that is why we are About To Be Railroaded.***

The local politicians are either playing dumb or are incredibly naïve. But they please the choo-choo crowd with their great accomplishments. (It's important to please the choo-choo crowd. Especially the poohbahs.)

The folks at IDOT and Metra must think we are all banjo-playing, country bumpkins—or at least the elected officials running the place.