

TRANSPORTATION THAT WORKS TODAY. NOT 1950 OR 2050.

by Charles Herbst

The 2020s are going to be a serious challenge for Belvidere. A city that relies on gasoline sales to motorists and building gasoline-propelled vehicles isn't going to thrive much longer without making major changes.

To celebrate our 25th Anniversary, *The Boone County Journal* is proposing a pragmatic, affordable approach to provide the transportation facilities that the overwhelming majority of Belvidere and Rockford are already demanding. We hope that this community and its leaders will take these ideas seriously and start the job that needs to be done.

We want to underscore that the ideas that we are presenting are not pie-in-the-sky, pipe dreams. What is a pipe dream



is to continue to talk about a \$295 million passenger rail project that we all need to admit is not going to happen. It's pie-in-the-sky to pretend that we are all happily living in the Mid-Twentieth Century and that everyone has 2.1 cars and 2.5 children, all above average. Belvidere's (and Rockford's) vitality depends upon looking at the calendar, facing up to our challenges and exploiting our opportunities.

We have gone into considerable detail in this series, because we want to demonstrate the possibilities and practicality of what we are suggesting. There is a renewed interest in rebuilding American infrastructure, and the time to proceed is now, not a generation from now.

THE CASE AGAINST AMTRAK

by Charles Herbst

Belvidere and Rockford have spoken.

On November 6, 2018, Boone and Winnebago County voters were asked a question: "Shall the State of Illinois pursue reinstating passenger rail service to Northwest Illinois from Chicago to East Dubuque?" Sixty-eight percent of Boone County voters said yes. Eighty-one percent of Winnebago County voters also said yes. No officeholder who was in a contested election in either county received that large of a mandate.

This time Rockford and Belvidere really do have something in common: We want better transportation to Chicago and O'Hare International Airport.

Since the referendum, we have seen a token effort. A nice meeting the following February at Giovanni's attended by planners, politicians and railroad aficionados. Local representatives (namely Sen. Steve Stadelman) made sure it was included in the 2019 state capital plan to the tune of \$275 million. While that sounds impressive, it still has to be funded and approved by the Governor before the money is real. Given the state's finances, don't start lining up on the station platform just yet.

The *Journal* has spent several years studying the issue. In this series, we offer a modest solution. A better, feasible solution at a tenth of the price of a train. It's something we can have now instead of a decade or more from now.

Transportation or carnival ride?

Trains are a powerful icon in American culture. The train was integral to the Nineteenth Century westward expansion of the United States. In the first half of the Twentieth Century, before the ascendancy of the automobile and airplane, passenger trains were the dominant method of intercity travel. Many of our songs and movies glamorize traveling by train.

For those who enjoy the experience of traveling by train for its own sake, there are many opportunities that already exist. But this article is about providing economical, comfortable transportation, rather than pitching fantasies. Our goal is transit to Chicago, not building an expensive, \$275 million carnival ride.

The demand for public transportation to Chicago is well documented ...

There are about 25 buses running each way from Rockford to O'Hare or Downtown Chicago daily. None of these currently call in Boone County. There are also several Pace vanpools to Chicago that originate in Boone and Winnebago counties.

Current bus fare is approximately \$25 each way. A family of four using this service for a day trip to Chicago would pay well over \$200 for bus fare, local parking and connecting transit. Comparable Amtrak fares for similar distances include Mendota to Chicago for \$12, Kankakee to Chicago for \$8, South Bend to Chicago for \$16 or on South Shore trains for \$14.25. Many people from our area drive to McHenry County train stations or Elgin and ride Metra commuter trains to Downtown Chicago. The fare from Harvard is \$9.50, \$8.25 from Elgin.

Most travelers from this area to Chicago are not daily travelers, although, surprisingly, Boone County and Rockford have a growing number of "supercommuters," who commute to Downtown Chicago every day. A larger number commute to suburbs like Elgin, Hoffman Estates and Schaumburg.

... but we don't believe that passenger rail from Rockford to Chicago will work.

1. "Chicago" is huge. An Amtrak (or Metra) train would not go to where Rockfordians and Belvidersians want to go. Using any existing right of way, a train to Chicago from Rockford would terminate at Union Station. Although Union Station is reasonably convenient to the West Loop, it is a beast to connect from there to most any major Chicago destination. Union Station is not served by CTA trains (the El); the nearest is a subway station hidden under the Eisenhower Expressway three blocks away on Clinton Street.

The number one Chicago destination for Rockfordians and Belvidersians is O'Hare Airport. O'Hare is about one hour away from Rockford and is home to 60,000 new construction jobs and countless other high-paying, permanent positions at and near the airport. O'Hare has scheduled nonstop flights to over 262 cities worldwide. It is one of five airports in the world with nonstop service to all six populated continents. Unfortunately, providing a direct rail link from Rockford to O'Hare is not feasible. Existing rail lines don't offer a direct route.

Union Station has no practical connection to O'Hare or Midway Airport. Getting to O'Hare from Union Station

takes over an hour. Union Station has no direct service to Wrigley Field, Guaranteed Rate Field, McCormick Place or the Museum Campus. Connections to Northwestern, DePaul, University of Chicago and UIC are also indirect.

2. Chicago, like many of the world's large cities, was built around multiple train stations. Although all Amtrak trains are located at Union Station, trains to the suburbs are located in four different stations and can require a long walk or taxi ride between them. Philadelphia, Paris and London have spent billions on "crossrail" trains to connect their suburbs to all parts of the central area. Proposals have been made to build a Chicago Crossrail to O'Hare from McCormick Place and Chicago's South Side. These plans could help O'Hare-bound riders on a Rockford to Chicago train. But these are currently utopian proposals that are decades and billions of dollars away from fruition.

3. The nearly \$300 million capital budget for Rockford train service presumes the reconstruction of two bridges. But it does not include adding an additional track along 23 miles between Elgin and Bensenville. That run is home to a busy Metra line between Elgin and Union Station. Without an additional track, Amtrak trains from Rockford would become stranded behind local Metra trains in the Western Suburbs. This adds millions to the budget. The train would also have to navigate the notorious A2 railway interchange in Chicago, a chokepoint where existing commuter trains are already frequently delayed.

4. Amtrak is an intercity, long-distance service. Rockford to Chicago is more suitable for a "commuter" service model to O'Hare and Chicago. If Amtrak is the operator, we would likely see stops only in Central Rockford, possibly Elgin, and Chicago Union Station. Boone County would have no service. No one is going to drive from Belvidere or Perryville Road to Downtown Rockford to take a train to Chicago. If anything, they would take a Metra train from Woodstock, as is possible now, without spending \$275 million for a new rail line.

We see very few possibilities for continuing a railway journey originating from Rockford beyond Chicago. It would not make sense for Rockfordians to take a westbound train from Chicago. That leaves Champaign, Indianapolis, Michigan and the Northeast. Is there a local demand for such service? We've already established that Union Station is inconvenient for the Chicago-bound.

5. Commuter service needs far more frequency. Metra operates 9 trains a day from Harvard and even that is minimal. Each train needs a lot more people to fill than a bus or automobile. Assume 3 trains a day. We doubt that the schedule would please anyone.

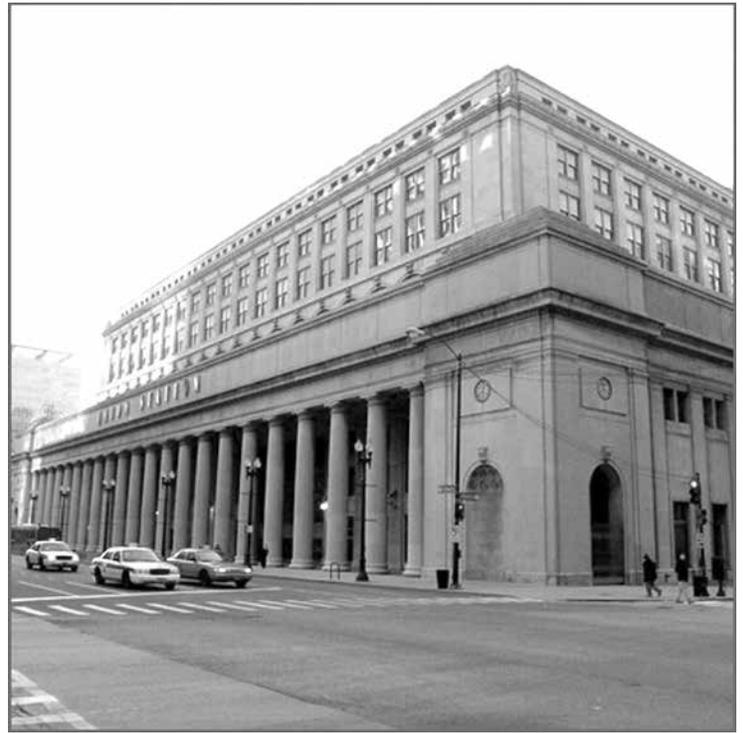
6. South Main Street in Rockford is not where the de-

mand is. Whatever may happen to Downtown Rockford in 2040 or beyond, the 2021 demand for travel to Chicago and O'Hare is on the East Side of Rockford and in Boone County. Clinging to memories and dreaming of a 1940s-style Rockford is counterproductive. We need to build transportation facilities where people are now, not where the planners and dreamers wish they were.

7. Metra is not the solution. The same logistics problems would still exist if Metra were the operator. The Chicagoland RTA is designed to provide transit service in and to Chicago. In Rockford and Boone County, our transit needs are considerably different. The Rockford Mass Transit District (RMTD) is much better suited to meet our transportation requirements.

Finally, \$275 million is a lot of money. It would buy many things this community needs. And that's just the capital budget for building a train line. There is still the matter of operating the trains. Who is going to pay for that? There is no support for a tax increase to finance ongoing railway operations.

Daydreaming about a train from Downtown Chicago to Rockford may be fun, but it is a waste of time. Worse, it overshadows serious discussion of how to provide effective intercity transport.



Chicago's Union Station at Canal and Jackson Streets is not connected to CTA trains or conveniently located to Chicago's many tourist and other attractions.

THE ROCKFORD ROCKET

by Charles Herbst

Last week, the *Boone County Journal* discussed a proposal to restore passenger rail service between Chicago, Belvidere and Rockford, and concluded that it was not feasible.

Passenger railway service to Belvidere was abandoned in 1950. Less than a decade later, a high-speed expressway, Interstate 90, replaced the passenger train to Chicago. In the 2010s, a multi-billion-dollar expansion of that expressway was completed. While the six-lane expressway has been completely rebuilt and is fully lighted, a proposal to include a passenger rail line as part of that expansion was specifically rejected.

Interstate 90 defines the communities along its path. Like many communities along an interstate highway, both Rockford and Belvidere have grown in the direction of an adjacent expressway. For better or worse, the local segment of Interstate 90 is the lifeline that connects Rockford to Chicago via Belvidere and O'Hare International Airport. Passenger railway service, like the stagecoach line, is an historical footnote.

Compared with comparable public transit in Northeastern Illinois, current bus service to Chicago and O'Hare is overpriced. Voters clearly found it inadequate. After concluding that a passenger train from Downtown

Chicago to Downtown Rockford was not feasible, we looked for other ways to provide high-quality public transit to Chicago and O'Hare from Rockford and Belvidere.

We studied transit systems near Chicago, Minneapolis, St. Louis and Dallas. We looked at both trains and buses, and systems that specifically had connections from outlying areas to both airports and downtowns. We also examined how these cities financed both building and operating public transit.

We concluded that the best way to connect Rockford, Belvidere, O'Hare and Chicago via public transportation is by using a modern bus rapid transit system.

We propose a link between the services of the Rockford Mass Transit District (RMTD), Regional Transportation Authority Suburban Buses (Pace), Boone County Public Transportation, and the Chicago Transit Authority Blue Line. This link would efficiently connect thousands of points throughout Northern Illinois. We'll tentatively call it the *Rockford Rocket*.

We realize our conclusion will disappoint railroad buffs. But we remind our friends that modern, well-maintained buses are quite comfortable, and that most trains do not offer the legendary amenities of the *Orient Express*. As we have said last week, we propose building efficient transit, not a carnival ride.

Launching the *Rockford Rocket*

We envision a four-stop express bus route along Interstate 90. All of the stations have already been built. We suggest a goal of 15 daily round trips with a one-way fare of \$5. We base this on the \$2 fare from Midway Airport to Kankakee, as discussed below. We would like to see buses similar to those used by Pace on their Interstate 90 service between Randall Road and Rosemont because of their roominess and level of comfort.

We believe the *Rockford Rocket*/CTA combination would allow passengers to reach the Chicago Loop, O'Hare, and other city locations faster than an Amtrak train.

The *Rockford Rocket* would have four stops:

Lyford Station. The route would begin at the Lyford Station on Lyford Road near the former Clock Tower. This station is now pretentiously called the "East Side Transfer Center." The station has parking, modern waiting facilities, restrooms and connecting local buses to all parts of Rockford.

Belvidere Oasis. The second stop would be the Belvidere Oasis. The Oasis has modern facilities, restrooms and easy I-90 access. This station would need improved "land side" access to a park and ride, kiss and ride and local transit.

Barrington Road/Hoffman Estates. Stop 3 is Barrington Road in Hoffman Estates. This station has express bus service to points throughout the Northwest Suburbs, including Downtown Elgin and Woodfield. There is direct, connecting service from this station to many employers, representing thousands of good-paying jobs. This station sits right on the Tollway with an enclosed, overhead bridge and park and ride facilities on either side of the road.

CTA Blue Line/Rosemont. The route would terminate at the CTA Blue Line in Rosemont. There is direct, connecting service via the CTA Blue Line trains to O'Hare (about 10 minutes) or Downtown Chicago. The Blue Line also connects to all other CTA trains. There are direct Pace Bus connections at Rosemont to suburban locations as diverse as Oakbrook Center and Great America.

Rosemont is an easy transfer point that avoids the congestion often present on O'Hare roadways. This means a faster trip to both the airport and downtown.

A major advantage of Bus Rapid Transit is flexibility. Service can be added and subtracted, and routes changed to meet the demand. For example, without a major financial commitment, it may be possible to include a shuttle service to NIU/DeKalb, Beloit, Janesville or Freeport. If demand doesn't materialize, the service can easily be cut back.

Where similar transit already works

With many commercial buses already operating along the route, we believe there is adequate proof that demand for the service exists. The *Rockford Rocket* adds additional transfer points at a considerably lower fare.

We found three similar places where this concept works well. All three examples provide easy access to downtown as well an international airport for very reasonable fares. Each one connects two different transit systems, yet provides a seamless ride.

1. Kankakee. For a \$2.00 fare, River Valley Metro provides two approximately 30-mile express bus routes from both Kankakee and Manteno to the University Park Metra Station and the CTA Orange Line Station at Midway Airport. These buses operate 7 days a week and are subsidized by both Federal and Downstate Illinois transportation funds. Connecting to CTA or Metra requires additional fare. The trip from Kankakee to Midway takes about one hour and is the more popular route.

River Valley Metro offers free, unlimited parking at its Kankakee Station and has local buses operating from there to all parts of the Kankakee area. Free parking allows air travelers to not only avoid the drive, but also steep airport parking fees.

We found this incredible bargain particularly significant because it was operating in another "downstate" community and provided a link to the Chicagoland RTA. Any state or federal operating subsidies available in Kankakee County should also be available in Boone and Winnebago Counties. Incidentally, the sales tax rate in Kankakee is only 6.25 percent.

2. Eagan, Minnesota. Eagan, Minnesota is located south of Minneapolis, just south of the Minnesota River. For \$3.50, passengers can board a bus at the Cedar Grove Transit Station. The station straddles an expressway. The buses follow the expressway nonstop to the Mall of America. Riders can transfer there to the Blue Line rail service to Downtown Minneapolis and the airport. (Express buses are also available at the Mall to Downtown Saint Paul.) Free garage parking (but no overnight parking) is available.

3. Northwest Tollway/Randall Road. With the reconstruction of the Interstate 90 Tollway, Pace inaugurated new express bus routes along the Tollway. One of these routes is an express bus between Randall Road and the CTA Blue Line Rosemont Station. A \$2.30 fare includes a transfer to CTA trains and buses throughout the Chicagoland area.

We particularly liked the buses that Pace was using for this route. In addition to being fully handicapped accessible and kneeling buses to make the bus easier to board, the bus provides adjustable, wide leather seats and adequate personal space. Free wifi is available on the bus. These buses are as comfortable as Metra trains at a fraction of the fare.

Paying the Bill

We believe that the same combination of state subsidies could be used for the operation of the *Rockford Rocket* as are used by River Valley Metro in Kankakee in providing

connecting service to Chicago. This operating subsidy is a fraction of what it would take to operate a train between Rockford and Chicago or what the state is spending on subsidizing trains to Quincy, Carbondale, St. Louis and Champaign.

The initial construction costs are a bit more complicated. Let's give this plan a generous budget of \$27.5 million.

That is one-tenth of the budget for bringing Amtrak to Rockford. The lion's share of the cost to establish this service would be to reformat the Belvidere Oasis. Because of their nature, we suspect that these Oasis reformatting costs would probably come from several sources.

We will address this in more detail in the next installment discussing the Belvidere Oasis reformat.



The Belvidere Oasis



Ticket window at the Lyford Station

THE BELVIDERE OASIS

by Charles Herbst

Ask someone from Chicago, Madison or just about any other place in the Midwest what they associate with Belvidere, Illinois. For those that know anything of Belvidere, two images come to mind: Oasis and Chrysler Plant. These folks will freely admit they have only driven by and have never been to Belvidere proper. They haven't the faintest idea that Jeeps are made in Belvidere, and they generally have no idea where "Boone County" is, although they know it is "out there somewhere, maybe near Grundy" because they've heard both referred to on the weather reports. They have never heard of the Boone County Fair, nor is it a place they would likely attend. They have no animus toward us, but Belvidere and Boone County are as completely foreign to them as Timbuktu.

Conversely, the Belvidere Oasis, the county's most famous asset, is a black box for most of Belvidere and Boone County. The Oasis is the number one local source of fuel tax revenue and one of the largest generators of local sales tax. But it's not a place that anyone from Boone County even thinks about, let alone visits. When comprehensive plans are drawn and tourism is promoted, the number one stop in Boone County for travelers is ignored.

We discussed making the Belvidere Oasis a transportation hub in our last issue. Beyond that, we think the Oasis is an underutilized resource that can be something much better than it currently is. In this issue, we'll present our vision of the Belvidere Oasis as both a hub and principal gateway to modern Belvidere.

Bridge restaurants

In 1957, the world's first "bridge restaurant" was opened in Vinita, Oklahoma, about midway between Tulsa and Joplin, Missouri. The restaurant straddles Interstate 44, formerly US Route 66. Known for its restaurant, going to the Glass House was a real treat. An Oklahoma welcome center employee fondly recalled cajoling her parents to stop at the Glass House on family trips from Muskogee to visit relatives in Kansas.

The story was similar in Belvidere. When the Belvidere Oasis opened, it was the talk of the town and a treat to visit. Fred Harvey offered four different dining options and frequently advertised to attract local guests. A 1960 Methodist Church State Sunday School convention held in Belvidere had its capstone banquet at the Oasis. Publisher David Larson can remember hanging out at the Oasis as a teenager for soft drinks and plenty of late-night people watching.

Yours truly recalls looking forward to stopping at the identical-to-Belvidere Lake Forest Oasis for snacks on the way to Door County vacations. It was a treat.

Bridge restaurants were only built in Oklahoma and



The Belvidere Oasis

Illinois. American development of the concept was stopped in 1960 by a federal law that forbade commercial development in the right of way of interstate highways. But bridge restaurants became popular in Italy and spread throughout Europe. Today there are a total of about 60 bridge restaurants throughout the world in such far-flung places as Chile and Malaysia.

With tear-downs to widen the highways, there are only four bridge restaurants left in America. Vinita, Belvidere, Lake Forest, and the Lincoln Oasis in South Holland. Belvidere is the only one on the long stretch of Interstate 90 between Seattle and Boston. The Oasis operators have changed many times, and the crisp service of Fred Harvey and Standard Oil service stations is a distant memory.

The *Journal* has taken a look at some of those bridge restaurants and what made them special. We wanted to know what could be learned from the other bridge restaurants and how those lessons could be applied in Belvidere.

Recently, we took a trip to Tulsa and toured what is now the Will Rogers Arch in Vinita. We were also particularly interested in the Swedish bridge restaurant in Gävle, Sweden, known as Gävlebro (Gävle bridge).

Most bridge restaurants are built with the parking lot at highway level. Customers enter the pavilion and take stairs or elevators to the restaurant level on the bridge. But in both Illinois and Scandinavia, the site is conveniently graded so that the parking lot is above the road on the same elevated level as the bridge restaurant.

In Belvidere, the gasoline stations are located at some distance away from the bridge in their own freestanding structures. Conversely, in both Vinita and Gävle, the gas stations are attached to the bridge restaurant. Vinita had Kum-N-Go convenience stores in the same building as the bridge restaurant on the highway level. Restrooms were available on both floors. We were impressed with the much more accessible convenience stores and the more attractive selections on offer at Kum-N-Go than the 7 Elevens at Belvidere.

At Vinita, the upper level featured a McDonald's at one end and a Subway at the other. There was a small gift

shop and a small exhibit honoring Will Rogers and the history of the Vinita Bridge Restaurant.

Gävlebro interested us for several reasons. Like Belvidere, it has convenient, restaurant-level parking. It is about the same distance to Stockholm as we are to Chicago. Gävlebro is also about the same distance to Uppsala (a college town and commercial center) as we are to Schaumburg. Built in 1987, it is one of the most recently built bridge restaurants. Pictures of the Dinners Restaurant located there looked attractive, although many of the online reviews were critical of the food quality.

Gävle has positioned itself as a commutable, cheaper living alternative. There is rail service from the center of Gävle and bus service from Gävlebro to Stockholm. Gävlebro straddles the E4, a motorway that runs the length of Sweden. Lacking toll barriers, Gävlebro parking areas have direct access to the local community.

To be a must-stop service center for travelers, the Oasis must be a treat.

Interstate 90 motorists have many choices where they can stop, including Beloit and Hampshire. Why should a Minnesotan headed for Chicago stop in Belvidere? Would a truck driver based in Manitoba look forward to stopping at Belvidere? Would a couple from Toledo mention the Belvidere Oasis favorably to their friends back home? To compete, the Oasis must offer something more than a free toilet.

• We believe that an outstanding convenience



Fred Harvey at the Illinois Tollway Oasis



The Glass House bridge restaurant Vinita, Oklahoma



Gävle bridge restaurant Gävlebro, Sweden

store attached to the bridge would help distinguish Belvidere. Those who travel know Wawa, QT and comparable chains that inspire customer loyalty. Similarly, Japanese convenience stores are legendary for providing great take-away food, outstanding selection and incredibly reasonable prices.

- The Oasis needs to add electric vehicle charging and it should be convenient to the bridge restaurant. While a motorist is getting a 20–30-minute vehicle charge, a latte or lunch should be available for purchase.

- A winter garden might be the ideal setting in which to pass the time. Given our climate and the dreary landscape of Interstate 90, wouldn't stopping at an indoor garden be very appealing—after all, it's called an oasis!

- A room with slot machines might attract out-of-town gamblers and bring additional revenue to Belvidere. Why should all the local gambling revenue go to Rockford?

- There must be interesting places to eat. Something more than the same chain restaurants that are available in a hundred places down the road.

- Positioned on either side of the bridge restaurant, bus rapid transit will add additional foot traffic to support a greater selection of shops and restaurants.

- The Tollway customer service center needs a facelift and should be expanded to provide helpful travel information for both bus riders and motorists. Limited hours at a 24-hour facility are not helpful.

To make the Oasis viable as a transportation hub and inviting for local commerce, a park and ride lot would have to be built at the Oasis, presumably to the north. Given the topography, we believe a pedestrian tunnel could be built from the north end of the bridge restaurant and could come out at ground level just north of the eastbound Tollway parking lot. This would provide pedestrians with safer, weather-controlled access to local parking, drop off, and possibly local transit boarding. It would also maintain toll integrity by keeping Tollway

vehicle traffic from using the Oasis as an entrance and exit.

There is no reason to reserve the Oasis facilities for travelers on the Tollway. Local as well as interstate patrons patronize restaurants and other businesses at the Beloit and Hampshire exits without apparent conflict. We think what makes the Oasis a unique opportunity is the commercial synergy from reformatting the Oasis as a multi-purpose facility.

Successful development of the Oasis is how Belvidere can begin to attract the creative class.

One of the trends in transport planning is to consider integrated station development. Simply put, such development recommends clustering housing and commercial development at transit stations. With the existing and enhanced dining options at the Oasis and plenty of open land surrounding the Oasis, the area would be ripe for additional higher-quality commercial and residential development.

Building a bus stop, a park and ride lot, and local access would be an appropriate use of state and Federal Urban Mass Transportation funds. It is also possible that the proposed Federal infrastructure legislation may provide funding for electric vehicle chargers at the Oasis.

Some of the other reformatting costs would not be applicable to bus rapid transit and should probably be funded from other sources. The more commercial elements of a reformatting the Oasis should probably fall on the Oasis' owner, the Illinois Tollway, or its tenants. It would result in an improvement to their property and fall squarely within the Toll Highway Authority's economic development mission. Such an expense would represent a negligible element in the Tollway's multi-billion-dollar annual budget.

We hope that this series inspires our community and leaders to focus on these opportunities. Instead of dreaming, it's time for doing.



Original Belvidere Oasis