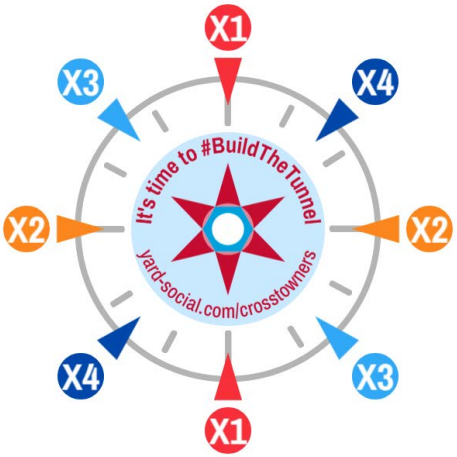
THROUGH ROUTES FOR CHICAGO'S COMMUTER RAILROADS

THE BEST MEANS FOR ATTAINING POPULAR AND COMFORTABLE TRAVEL FOR CHICAGO AND SUBURBS

It's Time to Build the Tunnel



Written and Published by

STAR:LINE CHICAGO

January 2026

First Edition

Introduction and Disclaimer

This booklet documents a private, independent, third-party effort intended to make the case for thru-running regional rail train service in Chicagoland. This document is a "crayon" and should not be considered more than a draft proposal for discussion purposes only. While there is some overlap with Metra's current efforts to implement a regional rail operating paradigm, the "Build the Tunnel" effort is not directly related, nor officially supported or sanctioned by Metra, the Chicago Transit Authority, Pace, the Regional Transportation Authority, Amtrak, or any other public or private entity, company, or agency. This booklet's author did not coordinate any information included herein with Metra, the Chicago Transit Authority, Pace, the Regional Transportation Authority, Amtrak, or any other public or private entity, company, or agency. This document was prepared by an unaffiliated individual, entirely independently from any prior, existing, or future official operational proposal.

For official CTA operational information and plans, visit transitchicago.com. For official Metra operational information and plans, visit Metra.com. For official Amtrak operational information and plans, visit Amtrak.com.

Table of Contents

Back From the Brink

In the wee hours of Halloween morning in 2025, our elected officials in Springfield did something that was thought nearly impossible a mere matter of hours earlier: they passed a transit revenues and reform bill after months – years – of discussion, debate, and deliberation. All of a sudden, the prevailing prognostication for post-pandemic Chicago-area transit went from draconian cuts in a fiscal cliff "doomsday" scenario, to a far brighter future with transformational levels of new revenues going to support the transit network that keeps the nation's third-largest city moving.

Senate Bill 2111 is not a perfect bill, but for the first time in a generation the Illinois General Assembly is popping the hood on how Chicagoland transit is organized, planned, funded, and operated. The legislation sunsets the Regional Transportation Authority (RTA), which currently functions solely as financial oversight bureaucracy, in favor of a new Northern Illinois Transit Authority, or "NITA". While the Chicago Transit Authority, commuter railroad Metra, and suburban bus operator Pace will continue to exist as separate agencies, NITA is tasked with more direct oversight of funding, procurement, strategic planning, and establishing service standards for each agency to maintain. These changes set the table for NITA to become a truly regional transportation agency by centralizing these important tasks currently done in triplicate, freeing up the three service boards to do what they should do best: operate safe, efficient, reliable transit.

As the new NITA board of directors is chosen and seated later in 2026, there are many crucial questions to answer and to ensure that the robust reforms detailed in Senate Bill 2111 are faithfully executed. Most importantly, it's crucial that NITA embraces their role

as a truly regional coordination agency rather than once again delegating overlapping tasks away to the service boards and maintaining the previous geographically-siloed paradigm that calcified Chicagoland transit networks and organizations into three separate operations based on competition and self-preservation rather than coordination and cooperation.

Chicagoland has never had a unified, integrated transit network; on the contrary, the previous RTA structure actively rewarded siloed thinking and operations due to a mix of mandatory farebox recovery ratios for each agency and fixed funding formulas that dramatically reduces potential incentives for a more regional approach to service delivery.

But today, we have the opportunity – and the duty – to seize the moment to deliver on a truly regional approach to public transit.

The Legacy Network

The Chicago region is fortunate to have two "legacy" rail transit systems available to us: Metra's commuter trains and the CTA 'L' system. Each of these systems have unique benefits for their respective core group of riders.

In the city, 'L' trains operate on their own dedicated tracks at high frequencies, connecting the various neighborhoods of the city. 'L' trains come often enough to provide "show up and go" service: riders do not need to check schedules and instead can simply arrive at a station knowing the next train will be only a short wait away. 'L' trains can carry lots of riders and make lots of stops, which are justified by the city's higher densities. As 'L' service goes further out of the urban core, however, its limitations become apparent: lower

densities of development mean fewer potential riders, and longer routes with more stops mean longer travel times for riders and fewer round trips per shift for operators, making further-out 'L' service more logistically and financially challenging to operate. Limited-stop patterns to speed trains up also require either confusing "skip-stop" operations that require riders to put more effort into determining which specific train will get them to their destination, or cost-prohibitive new express tracks to allow faster express trains to pass slower local trains.

Metra service, on the other hand, is ideally suited for suburbanites who live deep in the suburbs to get in and out of downtown quickly and easily. While the suburbs generally have far lower densities of residents and jobs than in the city proper, since the suburbs are built around easy access by car, commuter rail stations can be spaced far further apart with most riders willing to drive to the station and park. As such, Metra's trains can reach far higher top speeds, even potentially remaining time-competitive with driving in and out of downtown throughout the day. While Metra's trains are built for this type of service, it also means that there are more "penalties" for adding stops, since these heavy locomotive-hauled trains take longer to accelerate, longer to decelerate, and Metra's high-floor, one-door-per-car design requires trains to spend more time at each station for passengers to board and alight. Metra trains also require larger crews to run the train itself, and generally must share tracks with freight trains, greatly restricting how frequently trains can run.

Additionally, Metra service is fundamentally designed solely to get suburbanites in and out of downtown: as inbound trains fill up, they generally run with limited stops within the city proper until the edge of the Loop. At the Loop's edge, however, the tracks simply end: trains pull into Union Station, or Ogilvie, or LaSalle Street, or

Millennium, open their doors, and all riders must depart the train. Riders now need to find their own way to their final destination: on foot, by bus, by taxi/Uber/Lyft/Divvy, or by walking to an 'L' station to board another train. This also means that most suburb-to-suburb Metra trips that are not along a single line require a potentially very lengthy, inconvenient, multi-step transfer through the Loop between Metra terminals, if the schedules are conducive to transfers at all.

The shortcomings of both of these systems result in a gap of efficient suburb-to-suburb transit service, as well as less transit service in far-flung city neighborhoods and the inner tiers of suburbs. It's too expensive to extend the 'L' into these areas, both in terms of capital costs to build the line as well as operational costs of running trains further into less-dense areas with fewer potential riders. It's also too expensive to add more Metra infill stops, since each additional stop requires longer trips for suburbanites traveling to and from the outer suburbs, making Metra less competitive with driving considering the other constraints Metra service has to deal with.

For the last century, these binary technologies were the only options Chicagoland had when it came to passenger rail service. These separate approaches to planning and operating rail transit results in underutilized infrastructure and less efficient investment in improvements. Metra's broad "one size fits all" approach to commuter rail service means the same diesel locomotives hauling heavy gallery cars on express trains in the northwest suburbs are also used in places such as the Rock Island's Beverly Branch, with stations spaced every half mile. Even where fleet and infrastructure are not an impediment to increased service – namely, the Metra Electric District – operationally the MED runs commuter-style service that is not significantly different than the ten diesel lines in

Metra's system despite level boarding, a more nimble fleet, and an entirely freight-free corridor.

With these constraints to Metra service, our elected officials are forced to assume that the only other option for passenger rail service is extending CTA 'L' trains further and further out of the urban core, including the $5.75-billion Red Line Extension currently underway. This means we taxpayers are using scarce capital funds ultimately to build trains in areas that have parallel – albeit "different" – existing train service, rather than reinvesting those dollars into upgrading infrastructure that badly needs to be modernized (such as the Forest Park Branch of the Blue Line) or building "belt" rail routes such as the CTA's planned Circle Line, or the long-studied Mid-City Transitway, or to relieve busy "grid" bus routes like Western, Ashland, or 79th.

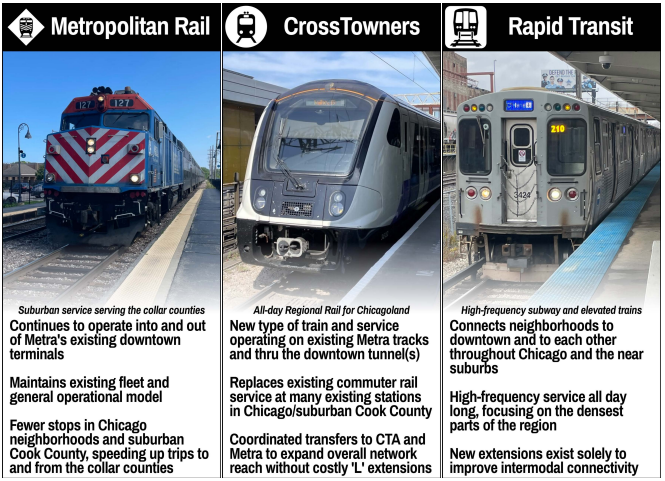
Thankfully, things are starting to change. Metra is investing in a more modern fleet, including lower-floor cars for their diesel lines and pioneering new, lighter, more nimble battery-powered single-level train sets for the Rock Island Beverly Branch, among potential other deployments. Metra has also committed to fundamentally shifting their operations from a "commuter rail" model to a "regional rail" paradigm, with a stronger emphasis on more frequent, all-day bi-directional service instead of focusing nearly exclusively on "traditional" commuting patterns in and out of downtown during rush hours. Unfortunately, these improvements may still have a relatively low ceiling for potential regional benefits, as Metra's infrastructure is still constrained by sharing tracks with freight trains throughout the region, and Metra's disconnected downtown terminals scattered around the edge of the Loop.

But there is a better way forward: it's time to Build the Tunnel.

The Missing Middle of Rail Transit

By changing how we fundamentally operate service on Metra's lines, including directly connecting lines through downtown Chicago, we can strategically connect and unify our passenger rail network to create a six-line, 140+ station regional rail network made up of new crosstown lines. These "CrossTowners" operate as something of a hybrid between the 'L' Rapid Transit operating model and Metra's Metropolitan Rail existing service by creating a central conduit for overlapping routes to share. This allows frequencies at a per-station level to better match what local densities can support, while also creating a high-volume, high-frequency core corridor that would essentially function like an additional 'L' line through some of the densest parts of the city.

CrossTowner regional rail lines would efficiently and effectively fill the transit demands of the region's middle tier beyond the affordable reach of Rapid Transit without degrading Metropolitan Rail service from the collar counties. City riders benefit from a wider variety of rail services offered at higher frequencies than current Metra service, while also focusing 'L' investments to finally move away from the CTA's rigid hub-and-spoke rail operating model. Collar county Metra riders benefit from faster trains making fewer stops: every train is an express train. Finally, riders in the "fringe" of suburban Cook County and outer Chicago neighborhoods will have a new network of fast and frequent trains that not only to downtown but thru and beyond it, with additional direct connections to Metra trains and CTA trains throughout the region.



CTA 'L' service and "traditional" Metra service would continue to operate much as it does today, albeit with CrossTowner service replacing Metra service at many stations in Chicago's neighborhoods and in suburban Cook County. The base assumption is that each individual CrossTowner line would operate twice an hour, or every 30 minutes. In areas where passenger trains need to share tracks with freight trains, half-hourly service should still ensure efficient movement of freight trains. However, four of these lines would overlap – also known as *interlining* by transit professionals, similar to how CTA Green and Pink Line trains share the Lake Street 'L' between Ashland/Lake and the Loop – through the tunnel and down the Metra Electric as far as Hyde Park. With the schedules of these four half-hourly lines centrally coordinated, CrossTowners would operate at Rapid-Transit-like 7.5-minute headways from Clybourn to 67th Street all day long. (Many other parts of the city and some suburbs would have similar 15-minute service where two CrossTowner routes overlap.)

STAR:LINE CHICAGO

CrossTowner Regional Rail

Tunnel Projects

1 Clinton-Roosevelt Connector Line (CRCL)
The tunnel connects the Metra Electric Line to the Metra Union Pacific North and Metra Union Pacific Northwest Lines via Chicago Union Station with a tunnel and five new stations under Roosevelt Road and Clinton Street.

Surface Projects

2 A-2 Interlocking Modernization/Fulton Market Superstation
Reconfiguring this complex interlocking near Western Avenue allows for Metra Union Pacific West Line trains to access Union Station, with Metra Milwaukee North Line trains connecting to Ogilvie Transportation Center. To maintain connectivity, and to serve the growing Fulton Market/West Loop area of Chicago, a new "superstation" would also be constructed between Ashland and Ogden avenues.

3 SCAL Ramp Flyover and CUS Riverside Tracks
To allow for thru-running operations in Union Station, a new two-track platform would be constructed along the Chicago River connecting the existing North and South Concourses of the station. Potentially in conjunction with other changes to the St. Charles Air Line (SCAL) and Amtrak's Canal Street Lift Bridge, this project would add a ramp along the Chicago River to convert the existing SCAL Bridge into a flyover so trains to and from the Metra BNSF Line can access the new Riverside platform at Union Station with fewer conflicts with Amtrak train movements south of Union Station.

4 Sox Park Connector
Utilizing entirely publicly-owned land (air rights over the Dan Ryan Expressway and over Rate Field's northern parking lots), a new overhead rail connection would be constructed to connect the Metra Rock Island Line to Chicago Union Station. A new station would also be constructed north of 35th Street to maintain connectivity to the CTA Red Line and to better serve Rate Field for baseball games and other special events.

Infill Stations

In addition to the new stations integrated with the larger projects listed above, an additional 20 infill station sites have been identified throughout the CrossTowner network that would enhance access to the network and strategically improve connectivity between modes. Some of these new infill stations may be consolidations or relocations of existing stations. Additionally, some CTA 'L' extensions and infill stations that would greatly improve transfers and connections between the 'L' and CrossTowners are also noted on this map.

Peripheral Pulse

To better serve travelers throughout the region, Pace's limited-stop "Pulse" bus service would be expanded to provide frequent, quick line-to-line connections outside of the urban core, as well as to connect major trip generators that are far from CrossTowner lines, such as Midway Airport. These bus routes are intended to be implemented in the near term while further study is performed to determine optimal corridors for potential peripheral rail services.

Future Projects

In the longer term, there may be a desire to add additional CrossTowner service to the Clinton-Roosevelt tunnel, or increase frequencies beyond the tunnel's capacity. Alternatively, there may be a civic desire not to consolidate all services at Union Station for whatever reason. In this future state, a second downtown tunnel is envisioned under Ohio Street and Columbus Drive that would serve as a reliever or alternate alignment for trains transiting from the Metra Electric Line to the Metra Union Pacific North, Metra Union Pacific Northwest, Metra Union Pacific West, and/or Metra North Central Service lines. This alignment would also provide direct trips from Chicago's South Side to O'Hare Transfer. Additional study and consideration would be needed to determine the best ways to include the Ohio-Columbus Tunnel in a future state.

CrossTowners connect Chicagoland

#BuildTheTunnel
yard-social.com/crosstowners

January 2026

Not to scale

#BuildTheTunnel
yard-social.com/crosstowners
STAR:LINE CHICAGO

Lake Michigan

Loop

CrossTowners

- X1 Line X1 — Highland Park to 93rd/South Chicago via Clinton-Roosevelt Tunnel
- X2 Line X2 — Palatine to 93rd/South Chicago via Clinton-Roosevelt Tunnel
- X3 Line X3 — Des Plaines to Harvey via Clinton-Roosevelt Tunnel
  - X3 Line X3 continues to Arlington Park for special events
- X4 Line X4 — Winnetka to Blue Island via Clinton-Roosevelt Tunnel
- X5 Line X5 — O'Hare Transfer to Downers Grove via Chicago Union Station
- X6 Line X6 — Elmhurst to Blue Island via Chicago Union Station

Rapid Transit

- Red Line — Howard to 130th
- Blue Line — O'Hare to Forest Park
- Green Line — Harlem/Lake to Ashland/63rd
- Brown Line — Mayfair to Loop via Belmont/Sheffield
- Orange Line — Midway to Loop
- Pink Line — North Riverside Mall to Loop
- Purple Line Shuttle — Linden to Howard, Peak trains continue to Loop
- Yellow Line Shuttle — Dempster/Skokie to Howard
- Gold Line Shuttle — Garfield/Prairie to Jackson Park

Other Symbols

- Airport
- Indirect Transfer
- Peripheral Pulse Bus Route

Metropolitan Rail

- A Union Pacific North — Ogilvie Transportation Center to Waukegan, Select trains continue to Kenosha
- C Union Pacific Northwest — Ogilvie Transportation Center to Crystal Lake, Select trains continue to Harvard
- E Milwaukee North — Ogilvie Transportation Center to Lakehurst
- G North Central Service — McCormick Place to O'Hare Transfer, Select trains continue to Antioch
- J Milwaukee West — Chicago Union Station to Elgin, Select trains continue to Huntley
- K Union Pacific West — Chicago Union Station to Elburn, Select trains continue to DeKalb
- M BNSF Railway — Chicago Union Station to Aurora
- P Heritage Corridor — Chicago Union Station to Joliet via Lockport
- Q SouthWest Service — LaSalle Street Station to Orland Park, Select trains continue to Manhattan
- R Rock Island — LaSalle Street Station to Joliet via Blue Island
- U Metra Electric — Millennium Station to University Park via 115th (Kensington)
- Y Monon Corridor (NICTD) — Millennium Station to Munster/Dyer via 115th (Kensington)
- Z South Shore Line (NICTD) — Millennium Station to Michigan City, Select trains continue to South Bend

Stations

X1: Highland Park, Ravinia, Ravinia Park, Braeside, Glencoe, Hubbard Woods, Winnetka, Indian Hill, Kenilworth, Wilmette, Evanston - Central/Green Bay, Evanston - Davis St, Evanston - Main St, Howard/Clark, Rogers Park, Peterson/Ridge, Ravenswood, Addison/Lincoln, Clybourn, Division/Elston, Chicago/Halsted (Bally's), Cityfront Plaza, Lakeshore East, Randolph/Clinton (Ogilvie Trans. Ctr.), Chicago Union Station, Art Institute, Taylor/Clinton, Roosevelt, Museum Campus, 18th (Soldier Field), McCormick Place, 27th, Oakwood Blvd, 47th (Kenwood), 51st-53rd (Hyde Park), 55th-56th-57th, 59th (University of Chicago), 63rd, 67th, Stony Island, Jeffery Blvd (Bryn Mawr), South Shore, 75th (Windsor Park), 79th (Cheltenham), 83rd/Commercial, 87th/Baltimore, 93rd/South Chicago

X2: Palatine, Arlington Park, Arlington Heights, Mount Prospect, Cumberland Circle, Des Plaines, Dee Rd, Park Ridge, Edison Park, Norwood Park, Gladstone Park, Jefferson Park, Mayfair (Montrose), Irving Park/Keeler, Belmont/Kedzie, Western/Logan, Division/Milwaukee, Ashland/Ogden, Western/Hubbard, Grand/Halsted, Grand/Cicero, North/Ridgeway, Humboldt Park, Oak Park - Harlem/Lake, Ashland/Lake, Harlem/Harrison, North Riverside Mall, Cicero/Congress, Cicero/Cermak, Illinois Medical District, Cicero/Lake, Kedzie, Carroll, Halsted/18th, Western/18th, Cicero/26th, Western/21st, Western/Archer, Western/49th, Sox Park, Garfield/Dan Ryan, Garfield/Prairie, 59th/Perry, Ashland/63rd, 79th (Auburn Park), 75th (Grand Crossing), 79th (Chatham), 83rd (Avalon Park), 87th (Woodruff), 91st/Drexel, 95th - Chicago State, 79th/Dan Ryan, 95th/Dan Ryan, Ashland/79th, Gresham, Brainerd, 91st (Beverly Hills), 95th (Beverly Hills), 99th (Beverly Hills), 103rd (Beverly Hills), 107th (Beverly Hills), 111th (Morgan Park), 115th (Morgan Park), 119th/Vincennes, 123rd/Vincennes, Prairie St, Blue Island, 103rd (Rosemoor), 107th/Rhodes, 111th (Pullman), 115th (Kensington), 119th (RLX), 130th/Indiana, 137th (Riverdale), 144th (Ivanhoe), 147th (Sibley Blvd), Harvey

X3: Dempster-Skokie

X4: Winnetka

X5: O'Hare Transfer, Rosemont - Balmoral Ave, Lawrence/Ruby St, Schiller Park - Irving Park Rd, Franklin Park - Belmont Ave, Des Plaines River Rd, River Grove, Elmwood Park - Conti Circle, Grand/Harlem, Oak Park Ave (Mars), Narragansett Ave (Galewood), Central Ave (Hanson Park), Grand/Cicero, Downers Grove - Fairview Ave, Downers Grove - Main St, Westmont, Clarendon Hills, West Hinsdale, Hinsdale, Highlands, Western Springs, LaGrange - Stone Ave, LaGrange Rd, Congress Park, Brookfield, Hollywood (Zoo), Riverside, Berwyn - Harlem Ave, LaVergne (Ridgeland Ave), Berwyn - Oak Park Ave, Cicero/26th, Western/18th

X6: Elmhurst, Berkeley, Bellwood, Melrose Park, Maywood, River Forest, Oak Park - Harlem/Lake

Midway Airport

1 2 3 4

CrossTowner Network

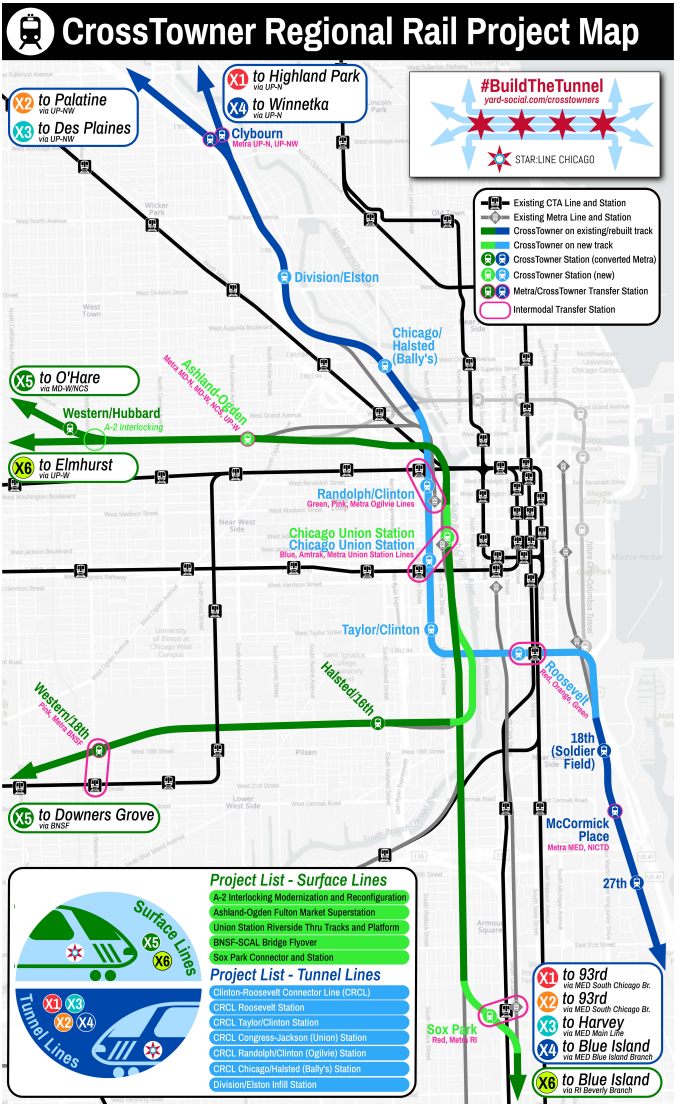
The CrossTowner Network is comprised of six individual lines: four "Tunnel Lines" that connect the Metra Electric Line with the Metra Union Pacific North and Metra Union Pacific Northwest Lines, and two "Surface Lines" that meet the Tunnel Lines at Union Station. The Tunnel Lines take advantage of existing electrification on the Metra Electric Line as well as the very low freight volumes on the Metra Union Pacific North and Northwest Lines.

To broaden the reach of the CrossTowner network, the two Surface Lines meet the Tunnel Lines at Union Station (largely utilizing existing infrastructure) to provide direct service to major job centers like O'Hare Airport and a variety of neighborhoods currently far from the reach of the existing 'L' network on Chicago's Northwest Side, the Far South Side, and in west- and south-suburban Cook County. As implied by the name, the Surface Lines do not utilize the tunnel and operate entirely at or above-grade, potentially allowing for diesel multiple-unit (DMU) train operation in lieu of some sort of electrification.

With CrossTowner service operating between Union Station and O'Hare Transfer, CrossTowners also can allow for an oft-desired "O'Hare Express" rail operation entirely using existing fleet and right-of-way, as every regular-service Metra North Central Service train now would operate with few or no stops between Union Station and the airport.

While a variety of smaller-scale enhancements and improvements would be included in the full CrossTowner concept, there are four key components to connect the Metra network together to create the backbone of the CrossTowner network.

Key Project Map and Listing



1. Clinton-Roosevelt Connector Line (CRCL)

The tunnel itself, the Clinton-Roosevelt Connector Line (CRCL) would be constructed below Clinton Street and Roosevelt Road through downtown Chicago. From south to north, the route would branch off of the Metra Electric Line north of 18th Street and head underground before turning west at Roosevelt Road. The tunnel would include a station at the existing Roosevelt 'L' station; a new station at Taylor/Clinton; a new station at Chicago Union Station that would also include a direct connection to the CTA's Clinton Blue Line station; and a station at Randolph/Clinton with direct connections to the Ogilvie Transportation Center and the CTA's Clinton Green/Pink Line station. At Grand Avenue the tracks would come up to grade level through the extant underutilized rail yard below the Ohio Feeder Ramp, with a new station at the new casino site at Chicago/Halsted. Northwest of the casino, the existing rail spur rises and ties into the Metra Union Pacific North and Northwest lines between Augusta Boulevard and Division Street.

2. A-2 Interlocking Modernization and Fulton Market Superstation

The A-2 interlocking is currently located just west of Western Avenue, where the Metra Union Pacific West Line crosses the Metra Milwaukee North, Milwaukee West, and North Central Service lines at-grade, forming a notable chokepoint for passenger rail service. By reconfiguring the interlocking, running Metra Union Pacific West Line trains into Chicago Union Station, running Metra Milwaukee North Line trains into Ogilvie Transportation Center, and adjusting yard assignments for trains laying over, the vast majority of conflicts can be eliminated at the interlocking. To maintain existing

connectivity and to serve the growing Fulton Market/West Loop neighborhood, a new "superstation" would also be constructed between Ashland and Ogden avenues allowing for transfers between all four Metra lines and both CrossTowner Surface Lines.

3. SCAL Ramp Flyover and CUS Riverside Tracks

To allow for thru-running operations at Chicago Union Station (CUS), a new two-track platform would be constructed along the Chicago River connecting the existing North and South Concourses of the station. Potentially in conjunction with other changes to the St. Charles Air Line (SCAL) and Amtrak's Canal Street Lift Bridge, this project would add a ramp along the Chicago River to convert the existing western approach to the SCAL Bridge into a flyover so trains to and from the Metra BNSF Railway Line can access the new CUS Riverside platform at Union Station with fewer conflicts with Amtrak train movements south of Union Station.

4. Sox Park Connector

Utilizing entirely publicly-owned land (air rights over the Dan Ryan Expressway and over Rate Field's northern parking lots), a new overhead rail connection would be constructed to connect the Metra Rock Island Line to Chicago Union Station. Amtrak trains are also expected to use this connection as part of larger plans to shift Amtrak service off Canadian National's freight-congested Joliet Subdivision (also known as the Metra Heritage Corridor). A new station would also be constructed north of 35th Street to maintain CrossTowner connectivity with the CTA Red Line and to better serve Rate Field for baseball games and other special events.

International Context and Comparisons

Looking beyond the United States, CrossTowners would operate in a similar fashion to London's Elizabeth Line, or the S-Bahn systems of central Europe. The technology of repurposing existing passenger rail facilities to create "regional rail" operations using faster, more frequent smaller vehicles rather than large intercity-style train sets is well-established globally, and international examples should be further studied to understand best practices and opportunities to reduce implementation costs. Munich, for instance, created its S-Bahn system in the 1960s in advance of the city's hosting of the 1972 Olympics; its central city tunnel now is so popular and well-utilized that a second reliever tunnel is currently under construction to minimize delays and provide additional capacity for more frequent service.

More directly comparable to the CrossTowner vision, while it unfortunately is not utilized as efficiently as it could be, our peer legacy-transit city of Philadelphia constructed its Center City Commuter Connection in the late 1970s, which functions in a similar thru-running manner below Center City.

From a capital and operating perspective, there is also a historic comparison much closer to home: over 80 years ago, right here in Chicago our civic forefathers had the foresight to construct two new subways for 'L' trains to bypass the congested Loop Elevated and to more easily and efficiently facilitate direct crosstown operational routings. To that effect, the 3.1-mile Clinton-Roosevelt Connector Line (CRCL) Tunnel is somewhat *less* ambitious than both the 4.8-mile State Street (Red Line) subway tunnel and the 4.1-mile Milwaukee-Dearborn (Blue Line) subway tunnel.

Costs, Considerations, and Challenges

It goes without saying that Chicago is currently having challenges with cost controls for new transit capital projects. The Red Line Extension's extremely high costs averaging well over $1 billion per mile for an entirely at- or above-grade route far exceeds expected costs even in the American context; compare the Red Line Extension's cost estimates to the ongoing D Line subway extension in Los Angeles, which despite being entirely underground through much more challenging terrain and seismic considerations is able to remain below $1 billion per mile. As other Chicago-area projects deal with similar levels of unchecked cost increases – including CDOT's State/Lake station replacement at a whopping $444 million – proposing another megaproject like CrossTowners should be viewed at least somewhat skeptically by taxpayers.

However, given that CrossTowners act as a service multiplier that allows Chicagoland to more strategically utilize extensive amounts of existing infrastructure, a cost-benefit analysis of thru-running regional rail will likely still perform very well. At relatively-conservative cost estimates (in the Los Angeles context, at least) of $1 billion per mile, plus $100 million per new station, the core CrossTowner vision could be realized for *less than $8 billion*:

- CRCL Tunnel and Stations: $4.5 billion
- A-2 Interlocking/Fulton Market Superstation: $1.5 billion[1]
- SCAL Ramp Flyover/CUS Riverside: $650 million[2]
- Sox Park Connector: $1.2 billion
- Total: $7.85 billion

[1] This figure was previously published by Metra from a prior study.
[2] Conservative estimate based on previous Amtrak CHIP cost estimates.

While these cost estimates do not include additional expenses – namely fleet, electrification retrofits, and infill stations – many of those considerations can be phased in over time, decreasing the upfront cost of the larger network. Similarly, additional studies and considerations need to be considered to estimate operating costs.

Eight billion dollars is of course nothing to sneeze at but also consider the benefit of creating an entirely "new" six-line, 140+-station rail network spanning a major American metro.

While capital costs are always an important consideration, just as crucial is building the political will to make a project like this a reality. Beyond simply convincing stakeholders that the vision has merit, additional considerations include often-fraught negotiations with host railroads to add service on tracks that are not publicly controlled, without unduly burdening the host's freight operations and obligations. We are, however, at a notable nexus point: as a region our leverage and negotiating stance with the Union Pacific Railroad will come to an apex within the next year or two as the railroad pursues a nationwide merger with Norfolk Southern. Railroad mergers involve numerous stakeholders, government agencies, and others with vested interests, and the associated negotiations and concessions will shape service opportunities for at least a generation to come.

With additional transit operating funding secured by Senate Bill 2111, the new Northern Illinois Transit Authority being created to streamline and centralize transit operating, planning, and funding strategies at a regional level, and with the host railroad of three of Metra's four busiest lines entering a crucial negotiating period, the stars are aligned to make CrossTowners our moonshot moment for the next generation of Chicagoans and Chicagolanders.

What's Next?

Our "make no little plans" moment is here. The fiscal cliff is no longer an extinction-level event for Chicagoland transit, but 2026 will be a crucial period to lay the infrastructure and planning groundwork for the generations that follow us. Here's how you can get involved:

- *Keep learning more about regional rail.* Visit the project website (yard-social.com/crosstowners) and join the conversation on social media (#BuildTheTunnel). Our friends at the High Speed Rail Alliance, the Coalition for Modern Metra Electric, and others have years of experience and research about the importance of fundamentally changing how we operate Metra service.
- *Tell the politicians responsible for appointing the new NITA board: We can't afford business-as-usual.* New NITA board appointees should be focused on creating a unified, regional approach to transit planning and funding, rather than interested in relitigating the turf wars of the past. It's time to move past the city-vs.-suburbs, us-vs.-them artificial binary that has divided our region for far too long.
- Once NITA is launched, *tell NITA's planners* as well as other regional planners from IDOT, CMAP, and others about how regional rail could transform how you get around our region.
- Most importantly: *talk to your friends*, family, neighbors, and local elected officials about the benefits of regional rail. *Feel free to make copies of this booklet and distribute widely.*

It's time to #BuildTheTunnel.

First Edition – January 2026

yard-social.com/crosstowners

Visit us on social media: @StarLineChicago