

# **‘Chicago should stay Chicago’: McHenry County leaders fret about possible CTA, Metra, Pace merger**

They worry about diluting local voices on board and taking on CTA debt

By Claire O'Brien May 02, 2024 at 7:04 pm CDT



People wait for the Metra train to arrive from Chicago at the downtown Crystal Lake Metra station last year. (Gregory Shaver — gshaver@shawmedia.com/Gregory Shaver for Shaw Media )

McHenry County officials are concerned about a proposal that seeks to combine Metra, Pace and the Chicago Transit Authority into one agency.

With legislation setting up such a merger proposed in the Illinois General Assembly, some McHenry County municipalities, including Woodstock and Huntley, have previously come out against such proposals, citing concerns about diluting suburban voices.

One version of the proposed transit governing board would consist of three members to be appointed by the governor, five from Chicago, five from Cook County and five from the collar counties, according to the text of the bill.

“This is not a good thing for equal representation,” Ken Koehler, a former McHenry County Board chairman who now sits on the Metra board, told the McHenry County Board Transportation Committee Wednesday.

The proposed merger came up during a discussion regarding Metra updates, where officials talked about the new fare structure unveiled in February and the Woodstock train yard, about which had a public meeting also in February. Officials seemed to agree during Wednesday’s meeting that changes needed to happen, but weren’t detailed about changes beyond their concerns with the legislation.

Koehler said Metra is also facing a “fiscal cliff,” but said the agency has been careful about how they allocated COVID-19 relief dollars. According to the Regional Transit Authority’s website, the agency is set to have a \$730 million budget gap, beginning in 2026.

“The ridership is still not where we projected it to be,” Koehler said. He added the agency is attracting new riders to the system.

McHenry County Board member Brian Sager, who also sits on the RTA board, said that Illinois as a state supports public transportation less than other states that have major metropolitan areas, like New York or Texas.

“It is true that there is a fiscal cliff there because of that lack of state support for transit overall,” Sager said. “Illinois needs to up its game significantly if we expect to have efficient, fiscally responsible transit services.”

Sager added COVID-19 caused a “nosedive” in demand for transit services.

“I think it would be appropriate for us to speak in one voice with a resolution by the County Board,” Sager said.

Officials talked about crafting a resolution for the County Board to oppose the proposed legislation, which officials seemed inclined to do. County Board member Michael Skala said while a position paper would be good, it needed to be more detailed than just simply expressing opposition to the bill.

“It shouldn’t just be, ‘We don’t want it,’ because that, that’s not helpful,” Skala said.

Sager also supported a resolution, but said it should be “carefully crafted.”

Board member John Reinert said he wanted to keep the CTA separate from other entities.

“Chicago should stay Chicago,” Reinert said, adding the proposal is like merging Chicago Public Schools with Crystal Lake schools.

The RTA already serves an umbrella agency over CTA, Pace and Metra, but each of those agencies currently has its own separate governing boards and budgets.

County Administrator Peter Austin said the county could have something for the board to vote on at its next meeting.

“We are very concerned about the CTA debt and very concerned about representation,” Austin said, adding those concerns are “interlocked in some respects.”