Ashland-Western Coalition Executive Summary - Read full statement at www.ashlandwesterncoalition.com

Improving Chicago Transit Authority (CTA) Bus Service

Our Coalition - - Chicago residents, churches, schools, businesses, social service agencies and neighborhood groups on and near Ashland and Western Avenues - - is dedicated to the best CTA bus service possible.

We seek to work with Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel, Aldermen, Congressmen and CTA officials to improve CTA bus service on Ashland Avenue, Western Avenue and all CTA bus routes.

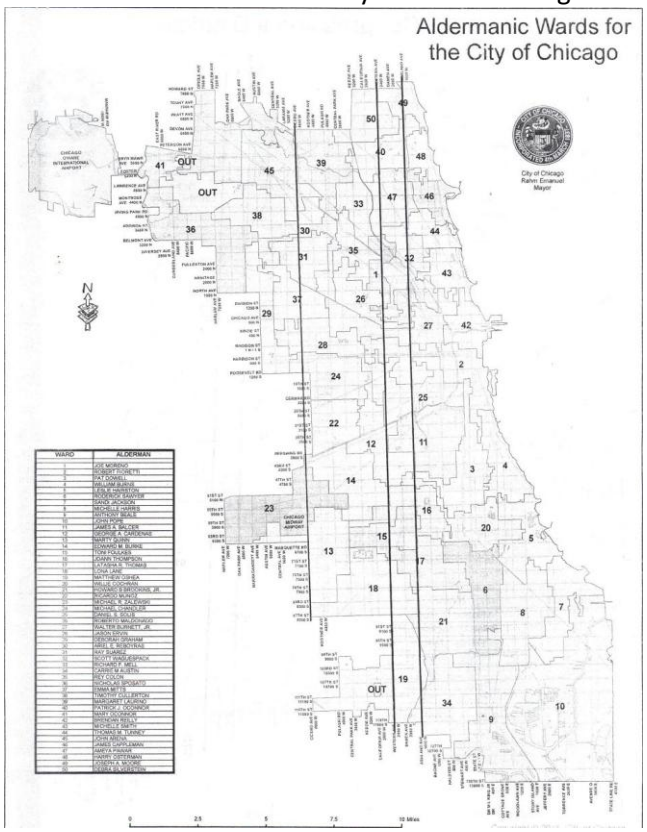
Maintaining Essential Vehicle Transportation

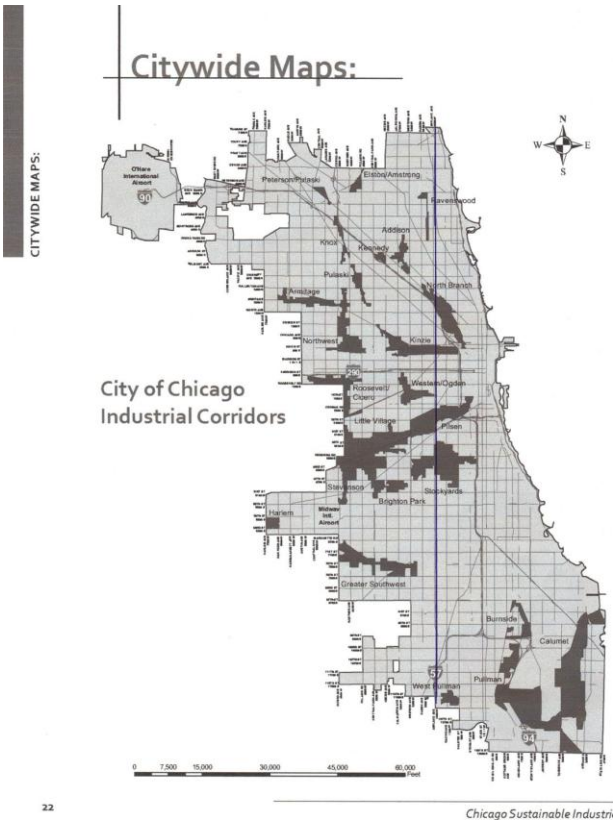
When considering bus improvements on Ashland and Western Avenues, Chicago must maintain these streets for essential vehicle transportation. Ashland and Western are two of Chicago's only three north-south arterial streets that feature two vehicle lanes in each direction. Cicero Avenue is the third.

City vehicle counts show Ashland, for example, carrying about 40,000 vehicles per day or 14.6 million per year. Residents, school parents, social service clients, hospital patients, church parishioners, truck drivers, business people and visitors enjoying the United Center, Wrigley Field and U.S. Cellular Field drive vehicles when CTA service is not an option.

Therefore, any solution to improve buses on Ashland and Western Avenues must maintain these streets as essential north-south transportation arterials.

Also, since Chicago's traffic congestion is a regional and citywide problem, bus improvement solutions are needed for all CTA buses to reduce citywide traffic congestion and spur development and jobs for all neighborhoods.



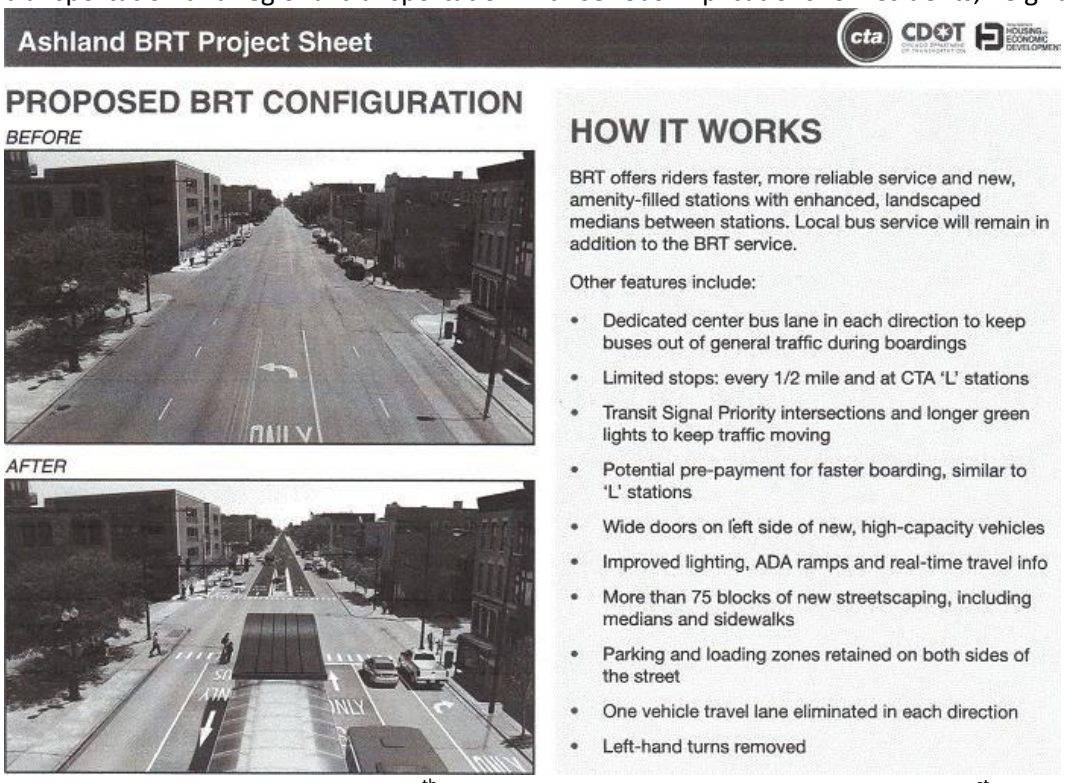


(Left) Ashland and Western are two of Chicago's only three north-south, four-lane arterial streets. (Right) Ashland runs from the Auburn-Gresham (s) to Edgewater (n) neighborhoods. Ashland serves six industrial corridors (Stockyards, Pilsen, Western-Ogden, Kinzie, North Branch, Ravenswood) and thousands of jobs. Ashland also serves numerous retail districts containing important businesses and jobs.

CTA's Proposed Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) for Ashland Avenue

In 2012 CTA proposed BRT on Ashland from 95th St. to Irving Park Rd. and on Western from 79th St. to Berwyn Ave. In response, our Coalition formed to assess bus service improvements on Ashland and Western Avenues.

In April 2013, CTA changed its proposal, calling for an Ashland BRT now and a Western BRT in the future. The proposed Ashland BRT would be a historic, fundamental transformation of Ashland Avenue, citywide transportation and regional transportation with serious implications for residents, neighborhoods and businesses:



•BRT would run 16.5 miles from 95th St. to Irving Park Rd. with phase one from 31st St. to Cortland St.

•BRT would eliminate one northbound vehicle lane and one southbound vehicle lane for BRT bus-only lanes, eliminating 50% of vehicle capacity.

•BRT would eliminate all vehicle left turns except for three northbound highway entrances.

•BRT stations would be built at center-street, spaced ½-miles and require passengers to cross traffic lanes.

•Some median planters would be reconstructed, risking mature vegetation. Additional median planters would be constructed. Sidewalks would be widened. No bicycle lanes would be constructed.

•Today's CTA Ashland bus service would continue in single north and south traffic lanes stopping about 1/7-miles.

•The first six miles would cost an estimated $116 million ($19.3 million/mile) in Federal Transit Administration funds for new bus lanes, stations, landscaped medians, buses and street/sidewalks construction. Extending service would cost an estimated $10 million/mile.

●A new "Ashland BRT Tax District" is being researched.

Missing BRT Information

Beyond BRT presentation materials, our Coalition asked CTA to provide critical missing information: a traffic impact analysis, an economic impact analysis, a history of the former Ashland express bus, and a list of CTA's capital priorities to understand BRT in citywide context. To underscore our request for information, our Coalition held a meeting in January 2013 with CTA officials. To date, we have received no critical information from CTA.

CONCLUSIONS

ACCOUNTABILITY FOR CTA ON ASHLAND AVENUE

CTA has not taken every measure to modernize Ashland CTA bus service within the current street configuration. This has resulted in low ridership participation and bus service deficiencies:

- Only 5.5% of eligible riders using the bus daily: 15,700 riders out of a potential 270,000 riders
- Slow buses with too many stops and no traffic-signal technology
- Bus stops before intersections obstructing traffic flow
- Slow passenger boarding
- Insufficient street safety and basic sidewalks
- Inadequate bus shelters and streetscaping
- Limited northern service and hours

Before spending an estimated $200 million on new BRT bus service, CTA has an obligation to first improve Ashland bus service at minimal cost, with minimal disruption and within the street's current configuration. Such a modernization has not occurred since 1957 when the Ashland bus replaced the former streetcars.

Also, since traffic congestion is a citywide and regional problem, the easiest, most affordable bus service solutions should be implemented on Ashland and replicated for all CTA buses and neighborhoods.

BRT IS WRONG FOR ASHLAND AVENUE

Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) is not suitable for Ashland Avenue. While BRT buses would move fast with dedicated bus lanes, BRT would require extreme and unacceptable hardships, sacrifices and costs from citywide and regional residents, neighborhoods, taxpayers and businesses that are not worth BRT's faster buses:

- Eliminating two traffic lanes and left turns
- Dangers for neighborhoods with vehicles seeking traffic relief
- Dangers for riders crossing traffic lanes which would also slow vehicle traffic
- Far station distances at ½-mile intervals
- No special stops for special constituencies such as schools, social services and churches
- Extreme, unnecessary taxpayer cost
- Costly, disruptive construction of median planters, streets and sidewalks
- Limited northbound service ignoring Uptown, Ravenswood, Andersonville and Edgewater neighborhoods
- Duplicative bus service with two bus operations

With more residents walking and biking, it is unacceptable to create new traffic congestion and turning restrictions that would force vehicles into neighborhoods seeking traffic and turning relief.

With Chicago's economy still recovering, it is unacceptable to create transportation hardships for businesses that risk thousands of jobs and may force businesses out of Chicago due to constricted transportation access.

With governments facing historic deficits, BRT's extreme estimated cost of $200 million is unacceptable since Chicago needs tax dollars for urgent priorities such as schools, public safety and job creation.

With the current Ashland bus service being substandard, it would be misguided to install a new BRT system while continuing to operate today's substandard bus without any improvements.

Lastly, with Chicago implementing vehicle-ticketing cameras citywide, traffic-signal technology systems should be implemented citywide on all CTA buses to increase bus speeds, reduce citywide traffic congestion and spur development for all neighborhoods.

COMMON-SENSE MODERNIZATION OF ASHLAND BUS SERVICE

Our Coalition wants CTA to do what families and businesses do: Repair and improve first before buying new.

For the first time in Chicago history, CTA should modernize Ashland bus service under Ashland's current configuration. As noted above, a full modernization of Ashland bus service has never occurred - - not since the Ashland bus was installed and streetcars were removed in 1957.

Compared to BRT, our Coalition offers an easier, more affordable and more equitable way to improve Ashland bus service: Modern Express Bus. Our MEB concept includes positive aspects of BRT; positive aspects of other bus systems; and common sense ideas to modernize bus service within Ashland's current street configuration:

•Street Configuration
Maintain two vehicle lanes in each direction
Maintain vehicle left turns

•Safer Neighborhoods
No new vehicles flooding neighborhoods seeking traffic congestion relief or left turn relief

•Less Cost to Taxpayers
One modernized bus operation instead of two buses (BRT, local bus)
Emphasis on 21st century technology over 20th century street reconstruction

•Faster Buses and Passenger Boarding
Reduce stops by 30% by placing stops at 1/4-mile intervals instead of BRT's 1/2–mile or today's 1/7-mile intervals
Special stops for CTA and METRA stations and for schools, churches, social services and hospitals
Stops across intersections to expedite vehicle right turns and reduce traffic congestion
Traffic-signal technology to expedite traffic and increase bus speeds
Intersection bus-jumps by removing 60' of north and south corner parking

•Faster Passenger Boarding
Fare boxes for quick-scan passes instead of cash fares that slow boarding, front and rear boarding

•Better Bus Stop Locations and Amenities
Maintain curbside service for better passenger safety and consistent with locations of CTA/METRA stations
Install larger, heated and lit shelters at all bus stop corners for basic amenities and for east-west bus riders

•Vegetation and Street/Sidewalk Improvements
Retain and expand median planters, increase parkway trees, encourage rooftop gardens
Repair deteriorated and missing sidewalks, install superior crosswalks/streetlights/vehicle speed-limit signs

•Expanded Service and Hours
New north service to Clark St. for Uptown, Ravenswood, Andersonville and Edgewater; 24-hour service

How to Pay for MEB
Beyond FTA funding for BRT systems, CTA's FY2013 budget identifies many other federal programs:
"FTA grant programs include Alternative Analysis (AA), Bus and Bus Facilities/State of Good Repair grants (SOGR), Bus and Bus Facilities/Bus Livability Initiatives, Clean Fuels Program, the Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery (TIGER), TIFIA (Transportation Infrastructure Finance and Innovation Act), Innovation, Coordination, and Enhancement program (ICE), Unified Work Program (UWP), Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality grant (CMAQ) and Department of Homeland Security grants."

CTA should develop an MEB cost estimate, allowing taxpayers to have an educated choice on this historic issue.