

Transportation in Evanston:

Opportunities to Improve Evanston's Economy, Environment and Quality of Life

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Executive Summary

This document has been developed with two basic premises in mind. The first, well documented in this report, is that the decline in the quality and use of Evanston's public transportation system is reducing the economic and environmental sustainability of Evanston, both for ourselves and for our children. The second is that Evanston has both the governmental and civic resources to reverse this situation, and to create a sustainable business sector and community, oriented around public transportation.

In the time since Evanston was built and developed as a city accessible by and dependent upon modes of public transportation, the world has changed. Since the Second World War and the creation of the interstate highway system, private automobile usage has become a dominant mode of travel. Because of its location and structure, these changes have put Evanston in a disadvantaged position. Consequently, a great deal of civic energy has gone into making Evanston's commercial districts and neighborhoods more automobile friendly, primarily by increasing parking availability.

On the other hand, Evanston's public transportation infrastructure continues to be one of the unique assets of our community. It is one of the major reasons people choose to live in Evanston. New businesses seek out communities with easy access to Chicago and dependable, frequent, and easy-to-use transit. The City needs to highlight its transit history and promote transit as one of its competitive advantages.

Families in Evanston spend on average \$5,407 a year to own and operate an automobile. It is the second largest household expense just after housing and greater than food or health costs. Improvements in public transportation will improve the City's budget. With reduced need for additional publicly subsidized parking structures, more capital will become available for other infrastructure and programmatic needs.

Continuing to promote Evanston as car friendly increases congestion on our established street structure. Dependence on the auto for intra-Evanston trips hampers citizens unable to afford cars, causes an increase in air pollution, and eliminates a vibrant street life. In the short run, these consequences harm our city and its businesses. In the long run, when we think about our children, grandchildren, and their grandchildren, we know that the use of non-replaceable fossil fuels and its effect on global warming must be reduced. This committee believes that Evanston has the community resources for a creative dialogue about these concerns and the wherewithal to improve its future.

We open this dialogue by proposing a series of 16 recommendations. Initially, we believe that the City needs a visible focus for this conversation and propose that the city launch and staff a Public Transportation Working Group that includes transit users, businesses, transit providers, civic and community organizations. We also suggest incentives for transit users in Evanston and better transit information. We also suggest zoning changes. We recognize that coordination with other regional and governmental agencies will be required to execute other recommendations such as improving service, integrating CTA & Metra fares, initiating a rapid transit bus route to O'Hare and reopening Evanston stops on the Skokie Swift line of the CTA. We hope this report will initiate the needed community discussion about these vital issues.

I. Introduction

A. Who We Are

We, the drafters of this report, are members of the Public Transportation Committee of the Evanston Plan Commission and the Public Transportation Committee of the Evanston Interreligious Sustainability Circle. The Sustainability Circle is composed of representatives of 14 Evanston religious congregations, working towards a sustainable future in Evanston for ourselves and our children.

The Evanston Interreligious Sustainability Circle is part of a network of seven Sustainability Circles in the Chicago area that are working to involve religious congregations in projects to improve neighborhood livability. The Interreligious Sustainability Circles are a program of the Center for Neighborhood Technology (CNT), a twenty-two year old Chicago-based non-profit organization that develops new tools and methods for livable communities. CNT works locally and nationally on cutting edge strategies for community economic and environmental improvement.

The Public Transportation Committees of the Plan Commission and of the Interreligious Sustainability Circle were leaders in the citizen effort that worked with the CTA and E.T.H.S. to improve the bus service at the high school this fall.

B. Why We Wrote This Report

We are concerned that the decline in the quality and the use of Evanston's public transportation system is reducing the economic and environmental sustainability of our community and jeopardizing the future for our children.

Evanston is struggling to find ways to improve its tax base so that it can maintain a high quality of life for its residents. We are concerned that increased automobile usage and the expensive infrastructure needed to maintain this growing automobile usage will continue to further erode our tax base.

Environmentally, we are concerned about the contribution of local automobile use to poor air quality, the global problem of climate change due to the burning of fossil fuels, and the depletion of non-renewable resources. We are also concerned about the effect on community quality of life when an active street life of walkers, bikers, and bus riders is replaced by local intra-Evanston trips being made primarily in individual autos. Even many children no longer walk, bike or take public transportation to their neighborhood schools. We believe that, with farsighted planning and action, Evanston can not only improve its own environment and quality of life, but also provide a model of enlightened self-interest that can serve as a model for other communities.

We hope that this report on Evanston's transportation needs and our recommendations for action will stimulate discussion and additional ideas in a variety of venues, governmental, civic, and religious. We want to make transportation a matter of widespread public interest and concern that can lead to innovative community planning and action.

II. Public and Private Economics of Transportation

A. Economics of Car Ownership versus Public Transit

Transportation is a significant household expense today. It costs families in Evanston over \$5,407 a year to own and operate an automobile. It is the second largest household expense in our region, just after housing, and we spend more for transportation than we do for food or health care. If we can reduce family transportation expenses, we can increase household wealth, expand home ownership opportunities and improve family budgets.

As a municipality, if we reduce the need for more automobile infrastructure, we can also improve the city's budget. Evanston has just constructed a new parking structure that cost close to \$20,000 per space. We will be paying the cost of this parking for a long time. If we can reduce the need for additional publicly subsidized parking structures, more capital will be available for other needed city infrastructure and programs.

B. Public Transit Gives Evanston an Economic Advantage

Evanston's public transportation infrastructure is one of the major assets of our community. It is in fact one of the major reasons people choose to live in Evanston. In a survey of Evanston residents published in the *Evanston Roundtable* in November 1999, residents ranked, on a scale of 1-10, the reasons that they chose to live in Evanston. Access to public transportation was listed as one of the top four reasons (6.17), just after quality of housing, public schools, and Lake Michigan.

According to the 1990 US Census data, Evanston had much lower car ownership than many other Chicago area suburbs. This represented significant savings for Evanston residents. In fact, Evanstonians, in 1990 saved \$50 million a year compared to our neighbors in Highland Park because we owned 1.3 cars per household rather than Highland Park's 1.9 per household. (This was calculated by taking the average yearly cost of car ownership in the Chicago area times the additional .6 cars per household in Highland Park, times the 15,628 households in Evanston).

Car Ownership in 1990 in Selected Suburbs/Job Travel

Town	Car Ownership (per household)	Use Public Transportation For Job Commute
Evanston	1.3	21%
Highland Park	1.9	11%
Hoffman Estates	2.0	3%

To the extent that Evanstonians have increased their car ownership since 1990, we have lost this economic advantage. Automobiles are an investment that declines in value each year. In contrast, housing appreciates, increasing family net worth. The more cars we own, the less we have to invest in housing or to spend in our Evanston retail establishments and restaurants.

III. History of Evanston Public Transportation

A. Changes in Regional Transit Access

Over the last 80 years, but especially since the start of the Interstate Highway program in 1956, U.S. policy has shifted the movement of people within regions from public transportation to the auto. This has really hurt places such as downtown Evanston that have had excellent regional access by transit, but have been bypassed by the Interstates. Downtown Evanston now finds itself in a very isolated location. Not only is it far from the Interstate Highway system (especially for east-west movement), but its regional transit access has steadily declined:

Steady Erosion of Evanston's Regional Access by Public Transportation (1955-present)

	1955	Frequent daily service by the North Shore (electric interurban) Line's Shore Line route which linked Evanston to all points on the North Shore discontinued
	1971	Fast, direct C&NW train service to Milwaukee and Northern Wisconsin discontinued
	1981	Off-peak and weekend service on Metra (then RTA) drastically reduced
	1982	Drastic widening of off-peak and weekend 'L' service frequencies
Circa	1988	Continental Air Transport O'Hare –Evanston route discontinued
	1995	A/B Express service on CTA North mainline rapid transit discontinued after being reduced in span of service for several years
	1997	Evanston Express converted to all local stops south of Belmont
	1998	'L' service discontinued after 1 a.m.

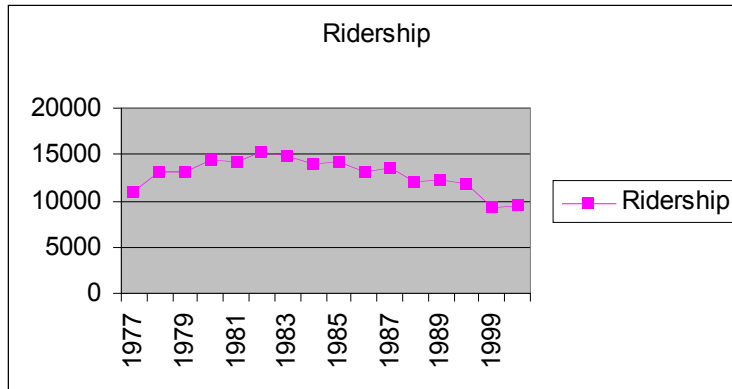
B. Intra-Evanston Reduced Service

A similar pattern has occurred in local service within Evanston:

Steady Erosion of Evanston Bus Service (1973- Present)

	1973	Evanston Bus Co. (EBC) shut down; replaced after several month gap with CTA routes (initially only one of four routes to serve downtown; after another month or two, essentially the present route structure instituted – slimmed down version of EBC route structure).
	1982	Saturday headways increased from 20 to 30 minutes on all routes
	1982	Local routes 201, 202, 203 lose evening service
	1985	Evanston reduced fares (on 'L' and bus) eliminated after City discontinues subsidy (around 1985)
	1992	Saturday service discontinued on routes 202 and 203
	1997	Saturday service discontinued on route 204 by CTA; replaced without interruption by Pace
	2000	Remaining local service must be considered at risk due to low ridership/cost recovery

Ridership in Evanston on the Purple Line



Source: CTA

C. Other Trends That Have Hurt Evanston

- Ascendancy of new shopping venues (Old Orchard, Woodfield Mall)
- Increasing competition of suburban job sites along Interstate system
- Residential development in previously undeveloped areas in the north and northwest suburbs.
- Replacement of railroads for regional and national trips by expressways and airports. Evanston has poor access to both expressways and airports.
- Despite the trend toward suburban development, the only transit route with significantly better service than 30 years ago is Pace's #250 Dempster route (from Davis St. to Des Plaines).

D. Evanston's Response

Evanston has attempted to adapt to a car-oriented society. It has:

- Increased requirements for developers to provide accessory parking
- Constructed three subsidized garages.

However, there has been no expansion of roadway capacity within Evanston or on its approach routes and almost any expansion would require demolishing existing neighborhoods and housing. As congestion has increased, Evanston has become effectively further removed from other points in the region. For example, because of congestion, residents must allow 15 minutes more to reach O'Hare than they did 15 years ago, especially at rush hour.

This situation will only get progressively worse. Poor transportation access is a key reason that Evanston has become less competitive as a corporate office site. In fact, the ten largest employers in downtown Evanston are now not-for-profit organizations. Despite these trends, there is a new economy emerging in Evanston and several hundred people a day commute to work in downtown Evanston and ride CTA, Metra and Pace. If all these people switched to auto commuting, as many already have, traffic would be substantially more congested and the streets would be less friendly to pedestrians.

IV. Looking Toward the Future

Since we can not significantly expand our roadway capacity, we instead recommend that we enhance our transit infrastructure and service so that transit can grow to become Evanston's

competitive advantage that will attract new businesses and development. Many businesses are now choosing lively urban environments for their businesses. The City of Chicago has experienced an upswing in business interest and Evanston has experienced some of this same type of interest as well. These businesses are interested in attractive locations for younger employees. They want easy access to Chicago, and dependable, frequent and easy-to-use transit will be a strong attractor if we can make it work. In summary:

- Evanston is uniquely served by transit.
- Increased dependency on the auto for access to downtown Evanston and other shopping areas will lead to a continued decline in accessibility as congestion on the street network increases.
- It would be a mistake to expect CATS, RTA, CTA, Metra and Pace to look out for what is best for Evanston without the active community and political involvement.
- Evanston's private and public sector leaders must be proactive in advocating proven public transportation services; the squeaky wheel gets the grease.
- Good transit and pedestrian friendliness can attract new businesses and residents.

The alternatives are continued service reductions and capital disinvestment for transit in built-up areas, such as Evanston, focusing it, instead, on rapidly growing areas such as Lake and Will Counties and, even, the near Northside of Chicago. (Note the examples of the slow orders on the Evanston 'L' that have been in place for almost ten years due to deteriorated bridges and Metra's removal of the third (express) track from Evanston to Clybourn).

V. Recommendations

The restoration of the same service that has been cut over the years may not be the most effective use of resources. Times have changed. Some of the services may have been ineffective, or there may not be a reasonable way to restore them. However, public transportation improvements are required in order to make service attractive. We should take advantage of new technology and new ideas.

Some of our recommendations can be implemented immediately, some will require further study within the city, and some will require the city along with transit users and others to work with the CTA/PACE/Metra/RTA. All are possible. Implementation will require that we begin a dialogue between all groups. The city is already working with the transit agencies and businesses in a limited way to conduct a study of downtown transportation issues. This existing group could potentially become a part of a broader Working Group of transit users and community groups that could address the community-wide public transportation issues.

The authors of this report are ready to work together with the city and regional transit agencies, the business community, civic and religious organizations to make these recommendations work.

A. Evanston Can Do This

1. Build Evanston's organizational capacity to make public transportation improvements.

- Establish a Public Transportation Working Group to address public transportation issues--the Group should have significant representation from public transit users along

with representatives from the transit agencies, Evanston businesses, civic, and community groups plus city staff and alderman.

- Designate or hire one staff person to work on public transportation improvements who will work with this Group and regularly coordinate activities with the surrounding communities and the transit agencies.

Implementation Strategy for Organizational Capacity:

Submit resolution to City Council calling for the immediate establishment of the Public Transportation Working Group to include significant representation from public transit users along with representatives from the transit agencies, Evanston businesses, civic and community groups plus city staff and alderman. The city working group that was convened for the RTA downtown transportation study could be asked to become a part of this larger group as a way to get it started more quickly.

- 2. Improve the quality and availability of transit information:** Put good maps and itinerary-planning software on Evanston-related websites and on kiosks scattered around town. The RTA Travel Center is installing itinerary-planning software which will be made available on the internet later this month. This should also be suitable for kiosks; planning should start now.
- 3. Promote “Transit-Check” to downtown employers and employees and city staff:** This program that provides vouchers for transit service as a non-taxable benefit was recently authorized by Congress; it has proven to be very popular nationally, including in downtown Chicago.
- 4. Create an integrated local bus system, incorporating CTA, Northwestern and Evanston Hospital service:** The present system seems to have an extensive amount of inefficient duplication. Various alternative scenarios are possible. Some towns (e.g. Ames, IA, Champaign, IL) have combined town and University systems with joint Boards.) The CTA has taken over the operation of the University of Chicago shuttles.
- 5. Provide incentives for transit users to shop downtown Evanston:** Provide discounts at theaters and stores for people presenting transit tickets.
- 6. Substitute “trolleys” for buses on part of the Evanston local system:** This could perhaps start with the portion of #201 north of downtown. This would make riding the bus more of an “experience.” It is known that the public is seeking “experiences” and is willing to pay for them. Other commercial areas in our region know this fact and are using it.
- 7. Test out “specialty services” such as low-cost round-trip public transit to downtown from various Evanston neighborhoods during weekend evenings to the new cinema complex or during lunch-time** for employees of the Civic Center, ETHS (this would include juniors and seniors as well as staff), District 65 employees, the hospitals and perhaps others. This will require further investigation to determine interest levels.
- 8. Improve facilities and routing for bicycle commuting:** Develop indoor bicycle storage, possibly within the old part of the Davis Street Elevated Station. Establish bicycle lanes on downtown and other city streets. Improve signage for bicycle commuters, directing riders to parking sites and safe routes.

9. **Review crosswalks, especially downtown:** Add mid-block crosswalks in commercial areas to make it easier for pedestrians to walk around downtown. For example, a mid-block crosswalk on Sherman between Church and Clark would make that street much more accessible to pedestrians.

Implementation Strategy for Programs 1-9:

Public Transportation Working Group (to be formed, recommendation #1) work together to develop strategies for implementing above programs.

10. **Zoning Changes**

- **Review the city's zoning ordinance and make changes to enhance public transportation and make the city more pedestrian friendly.**
- **Create special zoning overlay districts for 500 feet around all elevated and Metra transit stops:** Require new developments in these areas to include amenities to improve transit friendliness. These would include requiring new developments to include:
 - Transit shelters for bus stops in front of new developments,
 - Wider sidewalks,
 - Bicycle parking within parking garages,
 - Street furniture,
 - Placing drive-through windows in the rear of developments,
 - Frequent door entries for retail to avoid long blocks without building access, minimizing all curb cuts.

In general, changes should be made to ensure that there is a clear and attractive pathway between transit stops and stations and activity centers.

- **Reduce parking ratios in new projects if developers are willing to implement measures to lower car ownership in their projects:** Some of the measures that could ensure lower car ownership would be projects that :
 - Offer Location Efficient Mortgages to home buyers; these mortgages are for individuals who live in location efficient areas and own fewer cars than the average. The lender takes into account the savings that a family has from owning fewer cars when determining loan size. Location Efficient Mortgages are currently available in the Chicago area from Countrywide Home Loans, Draper-Kramer Mortgage Company, Nationwide Home Mortgage Company, and Prism Mortgage Corporation.
 - Provide free transit passes for the life of the mortgage to purchasers, and
 - Providing parking spaces for CarSharing cars. CarSharing is a newly formed cooperative that will provide hourly rental cars in neighborhoods for members of the cooperative. CarSharing expects to have locations in several Chicago neighborhoods starting in spring 2001.
- **Require developers to finish buildings on all sides visible to the public including riders entering Evanston on the Metra and Elevated tracks:** For example, the east side of the Hill development is especially unattractive to most of downtown and especially for those arriving into Evanston from the elevated.

Implementation Strategy for Zoning Changes:

City Planning Department staff work with Plan Commission and Zoning Committee to develop proposals for the above zoning changes.

B. Changes requiring agreements with CTA/RTA/PACE/Metra

11. **Integrate CTA, PACE and Metra fare structures**, allowing the Evanston Transportation Center to live up to its promise (only monthly tickets have any integration today). Downtown Evanston would benefit from being the transfer point for more people (in the same way as an expressway interchange) assuming that the stations are well integrated into the downtown. *The Center for Neighborhood Technology has worked closely with Representative Julie Hamos to press the RTA to lead the integration of the regional transit system that was anticipated when it was created.*
12. **Increase Metra service, particularly in the off-peak**, encouraging more people to make trips between Evanston and North Shore points by transit. This is a double-track, passenger-only railroad; the capacity exists so there would be no capital cost. Railroads have relatively low operating costs. Added fare revenue would cover much of them. A significant amount of this traffic exists; more should be encouraged; no one is pushing this. Weekday service should operate every 30 minutes, weekend service hourly. Consider A/B express service to save time and money.
13. **Increase CTA service, particularly off-peak express service**, encouraging more people to use the elevated on weekends and evenings. This will require investigation to determine interest and feasibility.
14. **Bus Rapid Transit** (BRT – limited stops, fancy buses, active “next bus” signs at stops, traffic signal priority, Etc.) should be operated on Dempster, originating on the Northwestern campus and terminating at O’Hare. There is an international trend toward this concept; Pace has recently started a study of potential application to the suburban Chicago area.
15. **Operate Evanston local bus service from the new Pace garage on Oakton Street** to increase efficiency. The garage was sized for this; currently, CTA bases Evanston local buses/drivers at its North Park garage, at Foster/Kedzie.
16. **Replace some CTA fixed route bus service with some form of dial-a ride:** Costs might be reduced while service quality increases. Start with the very inefficient owl service (three buses are required for this very lightly utilized service). Add evening and weekend service.
17. **Expand East-West Elevated service:** Reopening stations along the Skokie Swift line would make that line more usable and could add to the Evanston network. Joining with the other suburbs to push to extend service from Skokie to Northbrook on the existing track would also help greatly.

Implementation Strategy for 11-17:

Public Transportation Working Group (to be formed, recommendation #1) begin dialogue with appropriate transit agencies. Identify research needed.

V. Conclusion

Transit innovations are happening all over the world, including many places in the U.S. Overall transit ridership is increasing (even in the U.S.). There is no reason why Evanston, which was a “transit-oriented development” before the term was coined, should not be participating in these trends.

Efficient and interesting transit is the way for Evanston businesses and communities to build a successful and sustainable future. Public transportation could become Evanston's competitive advantage. It potentially is our key to an economically and environmentally sound future. Let's not miss this opportunity. We hope that our comments will lead to the formation of the Public Transportation Working Group and the opening of a serious city and community interest in this matter.

Evanston Interreligious Sustainability Circle

A program of the Center for Neighborhood Technology

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December 13, 2000

Dear

We have just completed the report, *Evanston Transportation: Opportunities to Improve Evanston's Economy, Environment and the Quality of Life*. This report has been put together in the hopes of stimulating public discussion and action to improve public transportation in our community.

We believe that the public transportation infrastructure is one of the major assets of our community and, with improvement it can become Evanston's competitive advantage. Focusing on its improvement is potentially our key to an economically and environmentally sound future. Let us not miss this opportunity.

We, the authors of this report, have a long history in Evanston and many years of professional experience working with our transit agencies and on public transit issues. We are ready to discuss these issues with you, and to devote time to working on any and all of the ideas expressed in this report. We hope that you will be interested in exploring them with us.

Sincerely,

Sharon Feigon
David Phillips
Gladys Bryer
Suzanne Carlson
Richard Martin