

More frequent MED service would give Southland a boost

By Kyle Whitehead



There's an old axiom in the public transportation industry that "it's all about the service." This principle conveys the reality that if you're looking to attract riders to a transit line, the most important factor is typically the frequency of service, or how often trains or buses arrive.

Nowhere in the Chicago region is this reality on greater display than the Metra Electric District (MED) line that runs more than 30 miles between Chicago's Loop and the Village of University Park. Currently, trains generally run every hour on the line, which stretches along Chicago's South Lakefront and into the far South Suburbs. Metra runs a few extra trains on the line during the morning and evening rush during the week.

This infrequency of service prevents residents from considering it as a viable transportation option. For those residents who don't work on a 9-5 weekday schedule, it's not even a viable option for commuting.

The Coalition for a Modern Metra Electric (CMME) hopes to change that. Active Trans has joined more than a dozen community groups from the South Side and South Suburbs that are calling for

Metra Electric to operate like a true rapid transit line, with trains running every 10-15 minutes throughout the day.

The coalition's other priorities include integrating fares and schedules across Metra, Pace and CTA using the Ventra card with a transfer discount, and eventually creating an express service on Metra right-of-way to O'Hare Airport via McCormick Place and Union Station.

The Metra Electric line, which carries no freight traffic, has long been seen as an underutilized asset in the region. Citizen advocate Mike Payne started promoting the idea of increasing frequency at public meetings in the late 1990s and successfully fought to get his Gray Line proposal in the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning's (CMAP) regional plan.

Later, the idea was branded as the Gold Line by community advocates when Chicago was bidding for the 2016 summer Olympics. That's when Hyde Park resident Linda Thisted of the Coalition for Equitable Community Development first got involved, and last year she started bringing local groups together to restart the conversation and eventually form a coalition.

In addition to several community organizations, coalition members include the Midwest High Speed Rail Association and Center for Neighborhood Technology (CNT). The Midwest High Speed Rail Association

sees the project as the first leg of its Cross Rail Chicago proposal for the region.

The coalition is working with state legislators along the line to build support, work with Metra to chart a path forward and find funding. The proposal enjoys broad community and political support, largely because of the economic benefits the new line would spur thanks to better job access and local development.

The South Lakefront and South Suburbs are frequently identified as "transit deserts" in the region, where working class residents lack access to quality jobs and critical services. In these towns and neighborhoods, residents are forced to spend a large portion of their income on a car to get to the region's main job centers, not to mention hospitals, universities and other vital institutions.

At the neighborhood level, leaders like Andrea Reed, the Executive Director of the Greater Roseland Chamber of Commerce, see the project as an economic driver for the community because of its ability to bring businesses, shoppers and tourists into local communities. Roseland is a South Side Chicago community that stands to greatly benefit from this proposal. Same is true of Pullman, which adjoins Roseland, where this new transit service would help the community reap the benefits of its newly designated status as a national monument.

Boosting the frequency of the MED line would provide a leg up to the South Side and the South Suburbs because it would mean greater access to jobs and its potential to enhance economic development.

Supporters can learn more about the project and sign-on in support at www.modernmetraelectric.org.

Kyle Whitehead is one of the Active Trans' campaign directors.