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New master plan emerges to transform Union Station



Commuters wait for an arriving Metra train at Union Station during the evening rush hour in Chicago on Friday, Dec. 9. (Chris Sweda, Chicago Tribune / December 9, 2011)

Jon Hilkevitch's Getting Around

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Extravagant proposals to transform Union Station in Chicago from a 1920s passenger depot into a modern transportation center have come and gone like passing trains.

As the result of a lot of plans and little action over the years, Union Station, last remodeled in 1992, has become increasingly crowded and uncomfortable. Moves like the one announced last week by Sara Lee Corp. to soon relocate business offices to 400 S. Jefferson Street will undoubtedly attract more commuters who live in the suburbs to Union Station.

If the station, which was designed primarily to serve long-distance trains, continues to be virtually left untouched, it will be unable to accommodate planned growth in both Metra

commuter rail service, Amtrak service and planned 110 mph rail service, officials said.

That's why this time around realistic improvements that can be made in a few years are a major focus of a new master plan study that will be presented to the public at Union Station, 210 S. Canal St., on Thursday during the evening rush period as commuters are going home.

The goals to create a more vibrant terminal that can be a catalyst for growth in the West Loop include:

- Expanding capacity to handle more trains and relieve congestion to make today's crowded concourses and mezzanines more inviting. Union Station handles more than 300 trains each weekday carrying more than 120,000 arriving and departing passengers.

Building an off-street CTA bus terminal on the existing surface parking lot south of Jackson Boulevard; and providing more convenient transfers to CTA trains as well as taxis and shuttles.

Launching an east-west bus rapid transit service from Union Station to Michigan Avenue and eventually Navy Pier.

Easing potentially dangerous conflicts with vehicles, pedestrians and bicyclists by reconfiguring how Canal Street is used.

Other projects that would follow include converting unused Amtrak baggage and mail-handling platforms to wider commuter platforms, adding direct access to and from the street level and building new tracks that for the first time would allow trains to pass through the station. (Trains currently approach from the north and south, but do not pass through.)

Yes, the master plan still contains a dreamier, long-term vision to build a new station in either the 200 or 300 blocks of South Canal and Riverside Plaza with a hotel, restaurants and other services, as well as multilevel subways under Clinton and Canal streets. Amtrak, which has owned Union Station since 1984, plans further improvements to both the concourses and the main building in future years.

But Chicago-area residents who have been around awhile have heard those unfulfilled promises before. Remember architect Helmut Jahn's proposal for a separate high-speed rail station east of the old post office? Or the original Daniel Burnham proposal for Union Station with an office tower? Union Station has seen more deconstruction, like the demolition of the original concourse building in 1968.

Amtrak did restore air conditioning to the Great Hall over the summer. It also plans to build more restrooms at track level and provide more seating throughout the concourses as part of a \$40 million rehabilitation project paid with federal funds.

To finally get something major done, the whole idea is to steer away from the type of over-the-top, exorbitantly expensive proposals made in the past and instead focus on common-sense fixes that can be accomplished, officials said.

"There have been a lot of grandiose plans of what the vision could be for Union Station," said Jeffrey Sriver, project manager at the Chicago Department of Transportation for the Union Station master plan study. "Meanwhile, the station today is operating at or near capacity for key parts of the day.

"What nobody has done to this stage is to look at maximizing the physical assets we have now, then go to more grandiose plans in the future."

The public will get a chance to weigh in Thursday. CDOT and Amtrak will hold a public meeting from 4 to 7 p.m. in the Union Gallery, just off the Great Hall in Union Station. It will be an open-house format with experts and visuals explaining ideas under consideration. A narrated presentation will be made at 4:30 p.m. and again at 6 p.m.

"This is a chance for people to see the thinking that has gone into these issues" and offer feedback, Amtrak spokesman Marc Magliari said.

A final Master Plan report will be issued in early 2012, officials said.

Improving Union Station

Short-term ideas

- A** Improved bus priority lanes
\$24.3 million budget
- B** Union Station Transportation Center (off-street bus terminal)
\$14.2 million budget

Medium-term ideas

- C** At Union Station:
 - Convert unused baggage platforms to add width to Metra platforms
 - Convert unused mail platform to add platform capacity and create new through tracks
 - Enhancements to existing passenger facilities
- D** Improve street access as part of Canal Street reconstruction



SOURCE: Chicago Department of Transportation, Union Station Master Plan

Union Station is the third-busiest railroad terminal in the U.S. Its passenger traffic levels would rank it among the 10 busiest airports in the U.S. The number of trains serving Union Station is projected to grow 40 percent by 2040.

Separate from the master plan study, a new website produced by the Midwest High Speed Rail Association offers the group's vision for transforming Union Station. It says a revamped Union Station served by high-speed trains — eventually 220 mph bullet trains — could provide a strong alternative to air travel for many trips. The website is downtownairport.com.

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