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Major changes discussed to expand, renew Union Station

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BY SANDRA GUY Staff Reporter September 10, 2014 10:32AM

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A Chicago transportation official outlined plans Wednesday to improve Union Station by widening commuter platforms, providing CTA buses off-street parking and potentially using old underground tunnels to open up space that could eventually lead to direct-to-airport rail routes.

Even more imaginative are ideas for the Great Hall — aerobics, yoga or tetherball, anyone?

The Metropolitan Planning Council invited people to submit ideas, and the winners included reinventing the Great Hall by putting down artificial turf and installing a hammock, space for tetherball and an area for yoga and aerobics classes.

The Planning Council wants to turn Union Station into a destination, rather than just a place where people pass through.

Another idea would be to use the Canal Street viaduct area for a steakhouse, and to open shops and restaurants in the station so people would want to stroll around or have business lunches there, said Kara Riggio, a planning council associate.

The idea is to have synergy between development in the station and development around the station, said Jeffrey Sriver, director of transportation planning and programming for the Chicago Department of Transportation.

Speaking at a forum at the station Wednesday morning, Sriver outlined these plans:

◆ Installing enhanced bus lanes and larger bus stations starting up Canal Street and going east on Washington, then west on Madison and south on Clinton. The new bus lanes and bicycle lanes would take up two of the four lanes that now exist on Washington and Madison streets. The project would be part of what is called the “Central Area Bus Rapid Transit” system, providing faster bus travel to the Loop and Millennium Park; construction on the \$32 million project is expected to start next year and take about a year. Of the \$32 million, 80 percent is being funded by the Federal Transit Administration and the rest by the city of Chicago, said Peter Skosey, executive vice president of the Metropolitan Planning Council.

◆ Creating a surface parking lot just south of the station for CTA buses — the city is now in the process of buying the property — to give more space to cars, cabs and pedestrians. Skosey said the project, expected to be complete in late 2015 or early 2016, would give bus riders a canopied exit and an underground pathway directly into Union Station so they wouldn't have to cross Jackson Boulevard or go outdoors. The bus terminal is part of the \$32 million Central Area Bus Rapid Transit project.

◆ Widening commuter platforms to 22 feet wide from their current 12 feet, and “squeezing in a few” more stairways and an escalator and elevator straight up to Jackson or Van Buren exits and entrances. No date is set for this project, but it is estimated to cost \$50 million to \$100 million, according to the Metropolitan Planning Council’s master plan.

◆ Using what Sriver described as “a hidden trove of space” — unused former mail service areas located South and East of passenger tracks alongside the Chicago River — as a new underground passageway that would open into a giant basement underneath the train platforms. No date has been set for the project. Its estimated cost is \$50 million to \$100 million, the master plan shows.

Besides the fact that Union Station is overcrowded, a state transportation official described how new high-speed-rail service will bring even more traffic into the site.

Joe Shacter, director of public and intermodal transportation for the Illinois Department of Transportation, said the new “Englewood Flyover” at 63rd Street in the Englewood neighborhood is slated to be tested in about three weeks; planning is underway to bring 110-mph train service between Chicago and Detroit; studies are being made for a high-speed route from Chicago to Danville, Ill.; and the high-speed rail project being built between Chicago and St. Louis is moving ahead, with the halfway point being reached about 16 months from now.

“We will expand the 110-mph territory by the end of next year, and the entire Amtrak passenger fleet, which is 30 to 40 years old, will be replaced with new rail cars in 2016,” Shacter said.









Shacter said IDOT is working with the city, Metra, Amtrak and others to expand passenger waiting areas so people can sit down while waiting for trains, and to improve Union Station’s design so the trains run on schedule and riders can find their trains more easily.

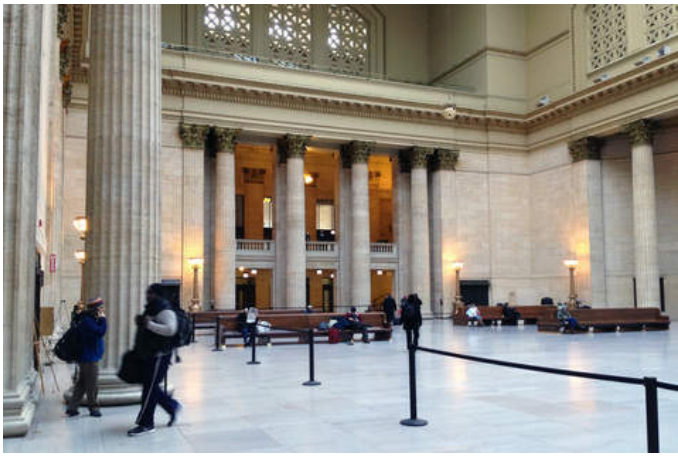
He said these improvements, planned to occur in the next 5 to 10 years, are expected to cost \$200 million to \$300 million.

As for high-speed rail, the Chicago-to-St. Louis route will cost \$1.5 billion, with more than \$1 billion coming from the federal government and \$400 million from Gov. Pat Quinn’s state capital program.

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The Metropolitan Planning Council sought ideas to improve Union Station's Great Hall; winners included installing artificial turf and a hammock, space for tether ball and an area for yoga and aerobics classes. | Al Podgorski/Chicago Sun-Times



A Chicago transportation official outlined plans Wednesday to improve Union Station by widening commuter platforms, and possibly using underground tunnels to open up extra space. | Sun-Times File Photo widening commuter platforms, and possibly using underground tunnels to open up extra space. | Al Podgorski/Chicago Sun-Times



A public hearing Wednesday on plans to increase space and improve service at Union Station drew a crowd to the rail terminal. | Sandra Guy/Sun-Times



Last year, officials set up demonstrations inside Union Station's Great Hall to show some of the ideas that had been submitted for improving the space. An exercise class was among the suggestions. | Provided

