

Gridlock on the lake

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By neglecting its transport system, Chicago is gambling with its future



AS A thriving midwestern city, Chicago is still the beating heart of much of America's industry. But its arteries—both road and rail—are increasingly clogged. A report released earlier this month by Illinois's auditor, William Holland, highlighted some chronic glitches in the network of buses and commuter trains. The region also needs a better approach to highways and rail freight.

It is hard, of course, to co-ordinate commuter transport between an urban system and one that serves surrounding counties with a different tax base. Chicago's Regional Transportation Authority (RTA), which covers the six counties of the metropolitan area, is supposed to promote better planning and links among the city's system and a pair of others that run suburban train and bus networks. But it has clearly come up short so far. The RTA, Mr Holland's audit concluded, needs to wield a firmer hand, over budgets and in general.

No matter how the RTA allocates the pie, however, the current pot of money seems woefully inadequate. Operating costs have grown three times as fast as revenues over the past five years. Last month the RTA released a five-year "strategic plan" (otherwise known as a request for money) that called for, among other things, an extra \$400m in annual operating funds and \$10 billion in capital spending over the next five years. That will be a tough sell in the state legislature.

Freight traffic is arguably an even bigger problem. In this, Chicago is unique. Six of the country's seven biggest-earning railways converge there, and the city is still the hub for a staggering amount of trans-continental commerce. Managing logistics and supply chains for distant companies, as well as physically moving goods around at warehouses and inter-modal hubs, generates lots of jobs for the area. Chicago's ability to handle all this traffic is being badly stretched, however. Ann Drake, the head of DSC Logistics, says that west-east freight traffic continues to grow rapidly, as ever more goods from Asia try to make their way to the east coast.

Ms Drake's worry—and that of many others—is that Chicago's congestion will eventually cause many shipments to be rerouted around it, a process that could eat away its advantages. “We do not want to become another St Louis,” she says, gloomily invoking the city that lost its midwestern primacy to Chicago after failing to invest in infrastructure.

Helpfully, many business and civic leaders are moving transport problems up their list of priorities. The Metropolitan Planning Council (MPC), which presses for a co-ordinated policy for the region's big issues, has done a good job of channelling their frustrations into useful ideas. But there is something odd about the way that many of Chicago's leaders talk about these problems. They invariably try to link their suggestions to grand or abstract ideas, such as being a “global city” or winning a bid to host the Olympics. The simpler need is to get goods and people moving.

The awful state of Chicago's transport comes home most plainly to drivers sitting stationary in their cars. The public debate over making drivers pay to use the roads has been as shallow in Chicago as in the rest of America. The argument tends to revolve around whether it makes more sense to use tolls and private enterprise to pay for better roads, or instead to keep charging taxpayers for a system that just limps along. By contrast, not much is said about the role that prices might play in altering the behaviour of both companies and commuters. MarySue Barrett, president of the MPC, says that her outfit hopes to make road pricing a bigger part of that debate.

Hostility towards road pricing might be understandable in other parts of America. But one of Chicago's proudest feats was the creation of financial futures markets, which prompted far-flung firms and farmers to adjust their behaviour to the slightest twitch in the price of pork futures or Canadian dollars. Surely the system would work for Chicago commuters as well.