

The \$100 million dream: MacArthur may fund better Loop, Obama library transit

By Greg Hinz October 25, 2016

Lured by a \$100 million carrot, a Chicago civic group is ramping up its effort to revive plans for expanded transit service in the bustling and increasingly congested Loop area with a new element: better transit to the Barack Obama library site, too, combined with new investment in housing and jobs on the South Side.

The new proposal comes from the Chicago Central Area Committee, a 60-year-old organization focused on growing and making downtown work better. It's being disclosed now because CCAC is bidding for **an innovative \$100 million grant** that Chicago-based MacArthur Foundation is offering for the best big idea worldwide. Those applications were due early this month, and the foundation is expected to release its short list of finalists soon.

Though CCAC's plan is expansive, even wild in its ambition, it puts together in one spot two obvious concerns: downtown's need for added capacity on Chicago Transit Authority lines from the north and west, which now are near capacity in peak hours, and the South Side's need for both new service and massive redevelopment help.

The catalyst is the Obama library, which would be at the east end of the Hyde Park neighborhood in Jackson Park, roughly between 60th and 63rd streets. Right now, the location has only occasional service nearby on Metra's lakefront Electric Line.

"Chicago today is two cities," says **a CCAC video** submitted as part of the MacArthur application. "One buzzing with life and attracting the world's best and brightest. . . . The other is in need of investment."

A narrator in the video is Jacky Grimshaw, a major figure in the city's African-American political establishment who served as Mayor Harold Washington's intergovernmental relations chief and, until recently, was Obama's next-door neighbor in Kenwood. She's now vice president of policy at the Center for Neighborhood Technology.

"We need to expand our transit system. And we need to bring in people who have been left out," Grimshaw said in an interview. "It's a vision. I can't put a guarantee on it. But (Obama) could help get us where we need to go."

READ THE REPORT: A PDF of the CCAC's proposal

Much of the idea comes from Ed Zotti, a transit consultant and researcher. **I wrote a couple of years ago** about how he was working with CCAC to try to revive the old Central Area Circulator or connector plan, starting with a transit line from Union Station to Streeterville, mostly using existing right-of-way under the Merchandise Mart, Trump Tower and Tribune Tower on the north bank of the river.

The new element calls for the creation of a Chicago Transit Redevelopment Trust.

The trust would help generate support, planning and some funding for both the riverbank line and new service along Metra right-of-way as far as 79th Street, either a new line run by the CTA or much more frequent Metra service.

The trust also would be authorized to buy and invest in property near transit lines. As development and land values grow, the property would be sold and proceeds invested in South Side developments, CCAC says.

"The idea is to deal with both problems and do something for everybody," Zotti told me. "We don't want to get in an adversarial role with anyone, but we want to ask: How do we make the best use of limited federal money" available for new transit projects?"

The trust, which would be organized as an independent 501(c)(3) nonprofit, likely would need billions for the transit work itself. That could come from federal grants, creation of a special service area that would levy a small property tax downtown, or perhaps a transit tax-increment financing district like the one being formed to rehab the CTA's Red Line north.

But once the transit work is underway, the trust would focus on leveraging its real estate holdings to promote South Side development.

CCAC Chairman Greg Hummel said he's had preliminary conversations with Obama library officials and aides to Mayor Rahm Emanuel. "What I've heard back is they're interested."

Though CCAC was involved in the development of the **Dearborn Park project** in the 1970s, which was the spark that led to a rebirth of the Near South Side as a residential neighborhood, it has only begun to vet its plans with the many local groups that would be affected.

Beyond that, CCAC could end up competing for some of the same pots of money that the CTA is eyeing to extend the Red Line south from 95th to the city limits.

But the group's idea surely fits Daniel Burnham's "make no little plans" mold. And, frankly, it gets into a level of big-think city planning that has almost disappeared in the past couple of decades.

So it's trial balloon time. We'll see how far it floats. There certainly is a problem out there in need of a good innovative solution.

THE MACARTHUR GRANT APPLICATION

[MacArthur 100 Application](#)