

Metra directors: 'Dire' funding crisis may prompt service cuts

By Richard Wronski | January 11, 2019

CHICAGO — Three suburban Chicago members of Metra's board of directors have taken the unusual move of penning a newspaper opinion-editorial expressing their concern about the commuter railroad's "dire" capital funding crisis and warning of potential service cuts.



"Without a large infusion of funding from the state of Illinois, we likely will have to shrink the Metra system to match our shrinking resources. If that happens, it will impact our communities and scores of others all across northeast Illinois," said the op-ed, published Friday in the suburban Daily Herald.

The three directors include Rodney Craig, mayor of Hanover Park; Timothy Baldermann, mayor of New Lenox, and Don De Graff, mayor of South Holland. Their op-ed is part of a campaign by Metra to urge passengers and the public to press legislators in Illinois' capital city, Springfield, to approve a state infrastructure bond program.

The mayors cited a recent white paper commissioned by Metra and prepared by the Rail Transportation and Engineering Center at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. This paper says the failure to spend \$1 in preventive maintenance now can cost \$4 in deferred maintenance later.

"Too often maintenance and renewal needs are deferred or reduced to make up for budget shortfalls because the consequences may be minimal in the short term, but this is a false economy," the paper states. "Deferring maintenance and renewal has a negative spiraling attribute; the more things degrade, the more rapid the subsequent rate of degradation, so putting things off only makes the situation worse."

The mayors cite Metra's oft-repeated statement that the agency has the oldest fleet of locomotives and cars in the United States. Because of funding shortfalls, Metra says it is neither replacing nor rehabilitating the equipment on the recommended schedule, and the result is more mechanical breakdowns and more delays.

They also cite Metra data showing that more than half of its 800 bridges are older than 100 years, but that Metra can only afford to replace about three a year. The bridges are safe to use, but the cost to maintain them will only increase, the agency warns.

One of Metra's "biggest points of vulnerability" is a complex of switches known as Tower A-2, where three Metra tracks cross four Union Pacific Railroad tracks near Western and Grand Avenues in Chicago. Every day more than 350 Metra trains from seven of its 11 lines pass over this complex.

“A major failure there would seriously impact service across all six counties in our service area,” the mayors wrote.

Metra says although the switches themselves have been updated recently, the machine that controls them dates from the 1930s. Metra has to maintain the machine with parts salvaged from other old machines or fabricated. The entire switching complex rests on a bridge over Western Avenue that was built in 1905 and requires constant maintenance and attention.

The ideal solution, the mayors say, is “an extremely expensive, and at this point unaffordable,” bridge carrying one set of tracks over the other.

“We describe these conditions not to scare the public, nor to imply that Metra is unsafe. We will never operate an unsafe railroad,” the mayors said. “Rather, we describe them as a call to action: we must start to significantly invest in the Metra system if we want it to continue — and grow to meet the region's needs. The cost of not addressing our significant capital funding needs far exceeds the cost of addressing them now.”
