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A Rail System (and Patience) Are Stretched Thin in Chicago

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CHICAGO, March 25 — The century-old elevated train system here is as much a city fixture as the towering skyline and the piercing blue waters of Lake Michigan.

But deteriorating tracks and trains, chronic budget shortfalls and a region ever more dependent on rail service are forcing Chicagoans to confront the possibility that the system, commonly known as the El or the L, may be at a breaking point.

“We’re living on borrowed time,” said Frank Kruesi, the president of the Chicago Transit Authority, which runs the rail service. “The fact is, there’s no magic wand when we’re looking at modernizing a system that’s 100 years old in a very dense urban environment.”

The El, with its 1,190 rail cars and 222 miles of track, is the rail component of the transit authority, the second-largest public transit system in the country after New York’s. The C.T.A.’s trains and buses serve the city and 40 suburbs, logging 1.55 million rides daily. The El alone accounted for more than 195 million rides last year.

Many neighborhoods have thrived in recent years in part because they attracted residents eager to take advantage of the easy access to downtown that the trains afforded, some riders say. But the rail system is splitting at the seams, having carried 31 million more riders in 2005 than in 1985 on a fleet of cars with an average age of 27 years.

“I’ve been riding the El pretty much all my life, and I’ve never seen performance anywhere near this bad,” Alexander Facklis, 37, a rider on the Blue Line, said during a recent morning commute when a stalled train slowed most service. “There are delays every single day.”

For years, the story of the El has been one of too little money and costly patchwork maintenance, transit experts say.

Along with two other transit systems, Metra and Pace, which link Chicago to the suburbs by bus and by rail, the C.T.A. depends on a financing formula of fares and sales taxes that has not changed since 1983. The [state auditor general](#) has called the system’s financial condition “precarious.”

The [Regional Transportation Authority](#), which oversees the three transit agencies, is trying to persuade state lawmakers to approve a \$10 billion infusion of state and local money over the next five years. The C.T.A. needs \$5.8 billion to bring its system, including buses, into a state of good repair, officials say.

“We call this ‘the year of decision,’ ” said Stephen E. Schlickman, the executive director of the regional authority. The choice, Mr. Schlickman said, is between a “world-class transit system” and an economic downturn that, he predicted, a hobbled transit system would most likely bring about.

The combination of slow zones, construction projects and packed rail cars has unleashed complaints from riders at community meetings and on blogs like C.T.A. [Tattler](#), which refers to one of the most troubled routes, the Blue Line, as the “Blues Line.”

Jeff Gonzales, 40, sitting across the aisle from Mr. Facklis, said it used to take him 35 minutes to travel from his home in the Logan Square neighborhood to his job in the Loop. “Now, it takes an hour and 10 minutes,” he said.

Not far from where Mr. Facklis's and Mr. Gonzales's train had ground to a halt, a derailment in a tunnel last July caused a smoky fire and forced passengers on a packed rush-hour train to evacuate below ground and crawl to safety. The derailment sent 152 people to the hospital and snarled commutes on trains and buses around the city for hours.

Commute times have since doubled along that line, riders say, as deteriorating ties on many stretches of track have forced trains to travel as slowly as 15 miles per hour in some spots. The EI's slower trains prevent it from carrying as many passengers per hour as transit systems in Atlanta, Boston, New York, Philadelphia and the San Francisco Bay Area, according to a state performance audit released this month.

Next month, work is set to begin on a \$529.9 million expansion of the system's third-busiest rail line, the [Brown Line](#), which winds through some of the city's most congested neighborhoods. Ridership on that line is up 83 percent since 1979, according to recent figures, and officials at the Chicago Transit Authority predict the overhaul will increase capacity by 33 percent.

In the meantime, though, riders are bracing for more than two and a half years of track closings that could reduce the capacity of already packed trains by as much as 40 percent at peak travel times.

But transit officials say the work is a necessary evil. Without it, the system would almost certainly fall into a chronic state of disrepair.

Helen Harrison, an administrative assistant who says the EI is her only mode of transportation, faults Mayor [Richard M. Daley](#) for not paying enough attention to the problems. Ms. Harrison, 50, said she wondered how the transit system would handle an influx of tourists should Chicago win a bid for the 2016 Summer Olympics, a dream of Mr. Daley's. (The city is currently competing with Los Angeles to become the United States' bidder for the Games.)

"Mayor Daley should concentrate his efforts on this rather than on the Olympics," Ms. Harrison said.

Mr. Daley, who by law appoints several members of the C.T.A.'s oversight board, has said that luring the Olympics to Chicago could draw more federal money to assist with long-term upgrades to the system.

But for some, coping with the immediate future is more pressing.

"The notion that we're supposed to prepare for a doubling of our commute time for the next two and a half years is so laughable to me I haven't been able to get my arms around it," said Peter Skosey, a transit expert with the Metropolitan Planning Council, a nonprofit advocacy group. "I'm going to make sure my bike tires are inflated."
