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Editorial

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## **Stay on Track**

Americans made 10.1 billion trips on public transportation last year, the highest that ridership has risen in nearly half a century. That's good for congestion on the roads as well as the pollution that goes with it. But any mass-transit renaissance will come to a grinding halt unless a commensurate investment is made in upkeep and expansion.

As Libby Sander reported recently in The Times, Chicago's elevated train system, known as the El, appears to be near a breaking point. The second-largest public transit system in America after New York's is suffering from rising commute times as the century-old system deteriorates.

Public transit systems are financed through a combination of federal and local money, so parochial priorities play a big role in underinvestment. For instance, the Chicago Transit Authority's financing formula hasn't changed since 1983. But at the same time, the federal gas tax — which contributes money for public transportation systems as well as highways — hasn't changed since 1993. That means it hasn't even kept up with inflation in maintenance and construction costs, much less rising demand.

Part of the trouble with financing for mass transit is that the upfront costs always appear prohibitively large (for the next five years, Chicago's regional authority is seeking \$10 billion in state and local money) while the benefits are long term and extremely diffuse. As a result, projects often linger. Planners have been trying to build New York's Second Avenue Line since the 1920s.

Worse still, when money is scarce it is insidiously easy to delay maintenance.

Once a system begins to break down, it can hurt the quality of life and economic growth of a city. And it isn't just a problem for city dwellers. Buses and rail systems serve rural areas as well. Government officials

around the country should take heed of Chicago's problems. Meanwhile, Congress should at a minimum bring the gas tax in line with inflation.