

**CLIFF NOTES**

# Putting Metra on right track

I want to take this opportunity to bring riders up to date about some of the recent changes at Metra and to discuss the worrying state of Metra's finances.

At the June meeting of the Metra Board, I presented an outline of the progress made in the first 100 days since I became the CEO. We have tackled a variety of areas and have laid the foundation to take on even more in the coming months. Our goal is to create a culture of open communication, transparency, safety, customer focus and the optimization of our financial and physical resources. These will be our core values as an agency; and I plan to lead by example.



**Alex Clifford**  
Metra CEO

For instance, we have a new high-level organizational chart that will align our talents in the best possible way to move Metra forward. We are making progress on other organizational issues, including a study of job classification and compensation. We are

working to improve information systems, employee discipline processes and ethics compliance training.

We have reached out to public officials, business groups and other stakeholders whose consent and cooperation will be essential to our plans. We have improved communication with our customers through surveys, Twitter and e-alerts, and we've launched a systemwide expansion of our Quiet Cars.

We've also had to confront our budget problems. In the short term, that means covering the rising cost of diesel fuel. If May's average price of \$3.15 per gallon of diesel fuel remains the average price for the rest of the year, we would end the year \$18.5 million over our 2011 diesel budget.

We have cut costs by keeping positions vacant, curtailing overtime wherever possible, deferring our apprentice program and adopting other changes to our operations and support functions to trim \$6.2 million from that projected deficit. We can cover the rest with higher-than-projected RTA sales tax receipts, the end of the Seniors Ride Free Program and federal funds to help recoup costs from the February blizzard.

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# Seniors free ride program changes

Starting in September, the program that allows all seniors to ride for free on Metra, the CTA and Pace will end and two new programs will begin.

Most seniors will be enrolled in the Seniors Reduced Fare program, which will enable them to pay a reduced fare, usually about half of the regular fare, to ride public transportation in the Chicago area.

A smaller number – low-income Illinois residents ages 65 or over who are enrolled in the Illinois Department on Aging's Circuit Breaker program – will be able to continue riding for free under the Seniors Circuit Ride Free Program.

More than 440,000 seniors who already possess Seniors Ride Free Permits do not have to reapply to receive either a new Seniors Circuit Ride Free Permit or a Reduced Fare card based on their eligibility. From now through August 31, seniors can continue using their Seniors Ride Free Permits.

The RTA will start mailing the new permits in the first week of August. Existing Seniors Ride Free Permits will be deactivated on Sept. 1.

In February, Gov. Pat Quinn signed legislation that requires means testing for the Seniors Ride Free program. Only low-income Illinois residents ages 65 or over who are enrolled in the Circuit Breaker program will be able to

continue riding for free. Income levels are \$27,610 or less for an individual; \$36,635 for a two-person household to \$45,657 for a household of three or more people. Seniors should only apply for the Circuit Breaker program if they meet age, income and other eligibility criteria.

All other seniors qualify to ride at a reduced fare. Seniors do not need to reapply to the Circuit Breaker program or for the new Circuit Ride Free permit if they already have a Seniors Ride Free permit because the RTA will automatically mail the appropriate permits in August.

The RTA has already started sending correspondence to all seniors who are currently enrolled in the current Seniors Ride Free program advising them about the program changes.

Starting this month, the RTA will stop processing replacements for lost, damaged or stolen permits under the current Seniors Ride Free program to avoid sending duplicate cards.

On August 1, the RTA will begin mailing new magnetic stripe permits for fixed-route service for all seniors currently enrolled in the Seniors Ride Free program. Depending on their eligibility, seniors will receive either a Circuit Ride Free or a Reduced Fare Permit.

Starting, Sept. 1, existing Seniors Ride Free Permits will

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## On the Bi-Level

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We can't guarantee all letters will be printed or answered. Please keep letters to less than 200 words and include your first name, hometown and what line you ride. (Names are not required but strongly encouraged.) We reserve the right to edit letter for length and grammar.

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## SOUNDING BOARD

Got a question? We've got an answer

### Quieting the cars

Why have Quiet Cars when no one enforces the quiet? I have sat in two or three of them and there is a loudmouth on his cell, a couple talking loud enough for all of us quiet, tired, pensive souls to hear, or another couple chatting away, oblivious to all of us looking at them. Pray tell, there were two – not one, but two – conductors in today's car who did not seem to hear the couple in today's coach. So, back to my question, why bother? Would be SO nice to have a Quiet Car ... alas, may not come to pass, eh? Thank you for your feedback in your fantastic newsletter!

Rita

*We're received a lot of feedback about the launch of Quiet Cars. We're still in the early days of the program and we know it can be better. Please bear with us. We are instructing our conductors to make announcements and continue to hand out cards about the rules until the policy takes root. We are hopeful that our passengers will soon adjust to the change and you will get your quiet ride.*

### Not in reverse

Are there quiet cars on reverse commute trains during rush hour or not?

Danita

*At this point the Quiet Cars do not apply to reverse commute trains. We wanted to start with the peak-direction trains because that is where we handle the most passengers and therefore that's where we see the most problems. On most of our lines (and we know there are exceptions) the ridership is far lower for the reverse. Many of the cars on those trains are closed off. In some cases, the cars designated as Qui-*

*et for the morning trip inbound would ordinarily be closed off for the trip outbound. We will take a look at expanding the program once the current policy takes hold.*

### Location, location

I ride the Rock and I am all in favor of Quiet Cars. People looking to relax deserve a car that is quiet. But there are some groups who ride together regularly that enjoy conversing across the aisles. Putting the Quiet Cars in the second from the front and rear cars of the trains means we will need to find a new area to sit that will accommodate our group (sometimes as many as 15 to 20 riders). Just because we get a little loud and enjoy a good laugh after a strenuous day doesn't mean we are second-class citizens.

Bill

*Please accept our apologies for having your routine disrupted. We have tried to take an approach to implementing Quiet Cars that satisfies the greatest number of people. Unfortunately, no matter where we chose to locate them, there are going to be regular, longtime riders who will be impacted. That was true when we put the Quiet Cars in the end cars – we heard from plenty of regulars in those cars – and it is true with the second cars. If we had picked the third cars, there would be complaints from regulars who ride those cars. We had to juggle the impact on riders such as you with the feedback from overwhelming numbers of our riders who were asking us to implement Quiet Cars on all lines. We only put two Quiet Cars, at most, on each train. We are hopeful that you will be able to find space in the remaining cars to continue your camaraderie. Again, we ask all riders to treat others with courtesy and respect no matter where they are sitting.*

### Text alerts?

I just signed up for My Metra. However, e-mails about service alerts aren't going to be as helpful as a text message to my cell phone. I don't check my work e-mail on my phone, so if there is a last minute alert I will never see it.

Wendy

*We have been exploring that option. However, at this point the cost of sending so many text messages is prohibitive for Metra. There is a way to get texts sent to your phone, but it's a bit cumbersome: You could first sign up to follow your line on Twitter. Then, Twitter has a function in which you can sign up receive your Tweets via a text message. You'd have to follow the instructions for that on Twitter's website.*

### UPWoes

I have been commuting for 30+ years (mostly on the UP West) and I have seen it all but I believe in public transportation and take the good with the bad. I also enjoy reading "On The Bi-Level." I have never submitted a letter and/or complaint but today was the straw that broke the camel's back! Six trains were cancelled due to "lack of manpower." I mean, really? What is up with this line?

Theresa

*We apologize profusely for the extreme inconvenience experienced by our customers on June 13 when UP West Line trains were cancelled due to lack of manpower. Whether directly operated by Metra or not, the service is still Metra service and we assume full responsibility for the resulting chaos. Metra's CEO is personally working with UP officials at the highest level to develop safeguards that will prevent such an occurrence in the future.*

# SOUND OFF

“...the snarky, snotty observations by Metra’s customers about fellow commuters ... offer some of the best free entertainment around.” - SouthtownStar, March 13, 2009

## Multi-tasking

If you include riding the train with my Mom, I’ve been on the ICG for over 50 years. I remember the wicker seats and windows you could open. Often I amuse myself with the observations, comments and complaints of my fellow commuters in “On the Bi-Level.” But now I finally have seen what is the best. I was sitting in a four-seater (Saturday, nearly empty car). A lady wrestled her purse, shoulder bag, and duffle bag-sized suitcase into the four-seater next to me. She then sorted laundry from the suitcase, applied make-up to her face, talked on her phone and ate breakfast. At no time was she doing less than two of these things at once. Mind you, this is not a complaint but a salute to the ingenuity, balance and abilities of commuters. I wonder what’s next.

Amused ICG fan

*Oh we know what’s next, unfortunately. What’s next is the following letter...*

## Gesundheit

I’ve been riding the Rock Island train for 7 years now, and as you can imagine, I’ve seen people do some pretty gross things so not much surprises me anymore. However, I think I have found someone who takes the cake. There is a bald “gentleman” who I’ve seen board the Rock Island train in the morning from New Lenox who blows his nose and leaves his used tissue on the floor! He sets them on the floor right below his seat after he blows his nose and acts like nothing happened. My two observations: 1. You pass by the garbage when you exit the train



so hold onto your garbage and throw it away and 2. I’ve seen you read the Bible before so where in the Bible does it say its okay to be a slob and litter? This guy needs to wake up and realize that it’s not okay to throw your used tissue on the floor because some poor Metra employee has to clean up after your mess and it’s just plain gross!

Brian

*Just plain gross? We’d say that’s extraordinarily, extremely icky, off-the-scale gross.*

## Our math was off

While I enjoyed your reply to Frank in the June issue regarding the Hygiene Car, I think the solution you proposed is over-kill. The front and back halves of the coaches are sufficiently separated so that you can actually carry two passengers per car, cutting the projected cost in half. In this tight economy, we all need to save money wherever we can, and Metra is no exception.

Mike

*You are absolutely correct,*

*though we’d have to be careful about what to ban in each half. After all, we wouldn’t want one half to be hygienic and the other half unhygienic, or one half Quiet and the other half guys who want to practice their bagpipes, or one half oil and the other half vinegar, or half chocolate and half peanut butter – you get the idea.*

## Unmaking scents

James (the rider who suggested Hygiene Cars in May) has a point. But there should be a car set up for perfume/after-shave free riders. Many riders decide they need to marinate in their scents, one drop of which is too much. There are a lot of folks who are allergic to scents and are trapped riding with these “cloud” induced riders. This makes for a long day at work when you are suffering from migraines or worse because these inconsiderate people cannot smell their own stink.

Jayne

*We know this is a serious issue for some people, so we’ll simply ask perfume-wearers to*

*remember not to overdo it when spritzing away. We don’t think they’re trying to be inconsiderate. They just don’t realize the strength of their stink.*

## Defeating seat savers

Tom mentioned the seat saver who gloated over his successful “tactic” in avoiding having to share the seat (May issue). May I offer a counter-tactic: don’t ask if the seat is saved. My position is that if the seat is open, it’s available. If the seat-saving person says, “This seat is saved” Tom can reply, “When they get here I’ll move.” Just a thought.

Glenn

*And a good thought, too. It’s especially frustrating to be turned away from an open seat, only to see that seat stay open.*

## And the seat jerks

To the selfish, self-centered jerk on the Union Pacific North Line who routinely turns the second seat backwards from the direction the train will be going on the upper level so that the first seat cannot be occupied by another passenger: I politely asked you if you would shift your seat in the forward direction so I could sit down in the other seat, but you rudely exclaimed, “Are you asking me to change my seat?” Either you are either incredibly stupid or a really selfish creep! I couldn’t believe I had to point out that nobody is entitled to two seats during rush hour while other passengers have to stand!

Carol

*Funny how people who think they’re superior to the rest of us have a way of demonstrating that they’re not.*

## Summer Travel Notes

### Metra adds new board member

Brad S. O'Halloran was appointed to the Metra Board of Directors last month by the suburban members of the Cook County Board. He replaced James V. Dodge, who stepped down. Mr. O'Halloran is currently a member of the Board of Trustees for the Village of Orland Park, an office he has held since 1993. This is Mr. O'Halloran's second time serving on the Metra Board, having previously represented suburban Cook County on the board in 2003 and 2004. In addition to his roles in public service, Mr. O'Halloran is currently the Regional Director of Development for the University of Notre Dame, furthering the philanthropic interests and objectives of the university in the Chicago area. He is also president and executive director of Transportation Development Corp., Inc., which provides strategic business development and consulting services to the transportation and travel industries. He also currently serves on the boards of the Old Plank Trail Bank in Mokena and the Irish Fellowship Club of Chicago.

### Good Samaritans honored by board

The Metra Board at its June meeting honored two men who came to the aid of an elderly woman who had fallen on the Metra tracks in north suburban Glenview. The men, Dr. Raul Heredia and Mr. Adam Smiley, were driving on Glenview Road when they saw the woman fall. They left their cars and immediately came to her aid, lifting her from the tracks and out of the path of an oncoming Metra train.

The board said the men's actions likely prevented what could have been a much more serious incident. Dr. Heredia is pictured at right with Metra CEO Alex Clifford (left) and Metra Vice Chairman Larry Huggins. Mr. Smiley was unable to attend the meeting.



### Transfer facility opens at LaSalle St. Station

The LaSalle/Congress Intermodal Center opened last month at the southeast corner of Congress Parkway and Financial Place to provide a new, convenient and safe connection between CTA bus passengers and Metra riders. The center, built by the Chicago Department of Transportation, features a CTA bus terminal along Financial Place, a covered connection from the terminal to the Metra LaSalle St. Station, and an elevator and stairway to the Metra platform. The center also features energy-efficient LED lighting, sustainable landscaping and bike racks. Financial Place was converted to one-way northbound from Harrison to Congress to help facilitate bus arrivals/departures and increase safety in the area. The \$5.2 million project was funded through federal and local sources.

## The right track

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However, for 2012 and beyond, we are still looking at a funding gap, and that gap is only expected to grow as a result of the economy. Current projections show that from 2008 through 2013 we will have a cumulative shortfall of more than \$350 million in sales tax receipts. Over the past five years, the operating structural deficit has grown by 41 percent. Thus far, we have bridged this gap by transferring capital funds to operations, but this practice is not sustainable.

And we also have a growing gap between the dollars we need to keep our system in a state of good repair and what we have available. Over a 10-year period (from 2006 through 2015) that gap will total more than \$7 billion. If new sources of capital funding are not identified, Metra's 'state of good repair' will become the 'state of poor repair' and we face a downward spiral in operating and capital expenses. That means that as we deplete capital, we will have increasing operating expenses and increasingly inferior service. And we will shrink (less service) instead of growing. We've already lost some opportunities for New Starts projects because we can't demonstrate that we have the funds to operate that service. This is not a pretty picture, but it's accurate.

We will be working with the Board over the coming months to address these issues. We'll look at all our options. I can't tell you at this point what the solution will involve, but I can tell you we will do everything we can to keep our riding public informed about our discussions and to involve you in the process as much as possible.

*You can now follow me on Twitter @MetraCEO*

## Changes for seniors

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no longer be accepted on any CTA, Metra or Pace bus or train. Only the new Senior Circuit Ride Free or Reduced Fare Permit will be accepted. If you have not received your new Permit by August 15, please call 312-913-3110. The RTA's Customer Service Center hours are Monday through Friday, 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m.

For updates on the RTA Seniors Circuit Ride Free/Reduced Fare programs, visit [www.RTAchicago.com](http://www.RTAchicago.com).

To learn more about the Illinois Department on Aging Circuit Breaker program or to request an application, visit [www.cbrx.il.gov](http://www.cbrx.il.gov) or call 800-624-2459. Seniors are strongly encouraged to apply for the program online because that method of applying takes approximately six weeks compared to about four months when submitting paper applications.

### We still want you....

...to download a QR-reader app to your smartphone and then scan this image with your phone's camera. You'll be taken to our "My Metra" page, where you can sign up to receive alerts about service issues on your line. It's fast, easy and convenient.

