



Approved November 3, 2021

550 W. Algonquin Road  
Arlington Heights, Illinois 60005  
847.364.8130  
[PaceBus.com](http://PaceBus.com)

**Pace, the Suburban Bus Division of the Regional Transportation Authority  
550 West Algonquin Road  
Arlington Heights, Illinois  
Minutes of the Open Session Meeting of the Planning Committee  
September 8, 2021**

The Planning Committee of Pace, the Suburban Bus Division of the Regional Transportation Authority, met virtually in public session on Wednesday, September 8, 2021 at 12:00 p.m. pursuant to notice.

Chairman Canning called the meeting to order at 12:00 p.m.

### **Roll Call**

Directors virtually present: Directors Smith, Soto, and Chairman Canning.

No Directors were absent.

Staff virtually present:

Rocky Donahue, Executive Director  
Melinda Metzger, General Manager/Chief Operating Officer  
Erik Llewellyn, Chief Planning Officer  
David Tomzik, Planning Program Manager  
Ryan Ruehle, Priority Project Management Office  
James Garner, Department Manager, Research and Analysis  
Linda Swedlund, Manager, Executive Administration

### **Approval of Minutes**

Director Soto moved, and Director Smith seconded a motion to approve the minutes of the Open Session Planning Committee meeting of June 22, 2021. The motion passed with unanimous vote.

### **Public Comment**

Tim Ortiz, a case manager for an adult day service provider, emailed a comment which was read by Erik Llewellyn. Tim said his program attendees experience significant stress from paratransit rides lasting in excess of two hours, which happens weekly. He is concerned the problem goes unnoticed because paratransit riders with developmental disabilities are not always able to communicate their experiences, and staff are not always aware of pick-up times scheduled at other agencies. He asked Pace to address the matter urgently and transparently.

Richard A. Kwasneski, **Chairman**

Rachel Arfa Christopher S. Canning Terrance M. Carr Roger C. Claar David B. Guerin Kyle R. Hastings  
Thomas D. Marcucci William D. McLeod Jeffery D. Schielke Erin Smith Linda Soto Terry R. Wells

**Board of Directors**

Rocky Donahue, **Executive Director**

Melinda Metzger said Pace will reach out to Tim Ortiz after investigating, and noted that Pace, like all U.S. transit providers, does not have enough drivers for all the riders requesting service.

### **Issues/Discussions/Reports**

Erik Llewellyn reported on staff's post COVID-19 service restoration planning efforts. As part of the pick that began August 8<sup>th</sup>, Pace implemented 36 service expansions throughout the region:

- Reinstating 94% of supplemental or modified trips that serve schools. Feedback from school districts and assessments of pre-Covid ridership resulted in changes from pre-Covid service. In total, 28 routes had service changes to accommodate new school needs.
- Resuming service on 3 previously suspended routes.
- Resuming full service on 5 previously reduced routes (with minor changes to Route 383).
- Resuming Soldier Field Express service for two games (or more, pending operator availability).

Ridership has increased, particularly due to the reinstatement of school service. Pace saw 44,000 weekday riders over the four-week period after the pick went into effect, compared to 40,000 during the same four-week period last year, a 10% increase. In Waukegan, the average weekday ridership after August 12<sup>th</sup> jumped by 1,200 riders to 3,700 riders, a 46% increase.

Although trends are encouraging, Erik noted fixed route ridership is still down 47% compared to the same period in 2019. Pace anticipates ridership will continue to grow but will remain significantly below 2019 levels for the foreseeable future as concerns about COVID persist.

Metra's ridership is down about 75% from pre-pandemic levels and the reopening of many office buildings has been delayed, which means the demand for Pace commuter service is still low. Many of the routes suspended in 2020 were weekday "peak only" commuter routes that connected with Metra, and "off peak" service continues to see fewer reductions in riders than "peak" service today, 38% compared to 44%.

Erik identified challenges Pace faces in maintaining ridership increases. Fluctuations in student ridership may occur in the event of a COVID outbreak where some or all students at a school may be asked to quarantine or return to remote learning. To implement the August service changes, Pace hired 30 operators in addition to pre-existing vacancies. Pace's ability to implement service changes in the future is limited by the nationwide shortage of operators.

Later this year, Pace is considering the realignment of multiple routes to serve the new Joliet Gateway Center and the shifting of multiple routes to key distribution centers in the region.

Director Canning asked for ridership data on popular school routes in 2019 to see if Pace needs to further encourage students to return to transit. He noted increased traffic congestion in his region potentially caused by more kids driving or being driven to school. Erik pointed out that many school districts are having difficulty getting drivers for the buses they operate. Traffic may be the result of schools asking parents to provide their own transportation.

Attendees discussed Metra's ridership numbers and the caution exercised by companies reopening office buildings. Director Soto said she and Melinda Metzger will later attend a Zoom

meeting with a subcommittee of the TMA board to discuss businesses' return to work plans. She said that when commuters do return, it won't be in the same numbers as before and we must use different types of service, like Vanpool.

Ryan Ruehle provided rapid transit program updates:

Dempster Line – Fabrication of the vertical markers and shelters is underway. Staff is working with IDOT on civil construction permits. Pace is unable to provide a definitive schedule for groundbreaking until permits are approved.

Milwaukee Line – Erik said the most recent ridership is 1200 weekday riders (compared to 2800 pre-pandemic riders), 1000 Saturday riders, and 900 Sunday riders. Because more service was added to Saturday and Sunday, ridership is more comparable to its pre-pandemic levels. Route 270, which provides underlying service, carries 240 weekday riders, 225 Saturday riders, and 122 Sunday riders. Ridership changes are not as drastic because ridership is low in general.

Halsted Line – Staff continues to coordinate with project partners at CTA, CDOT, and IDOT on conceptual designs for roadway improvements, which include potential segments of bus lanes and queue jumps along the corridor. Once a conceptual engineering design is complete, the team will produce the federally required need for documentation, anticipated to be ready in May 2022.

95<sup>th</sup> Street Line – This project received a \$500,000 Invest in Cook grant to complete advanced conceptual design and documentation. The scope of services is slated to begin in the fourth quarter of this year and will take approximately nine months to complete. Funding for design and construction has been fully committed under the CMAQ program administered by CMAP.

Ryan presented on the public comments received for the Driving Innovation plan. The public comment period began on June 22<sup>nd</sup> and concluded on August 22<sup>nd</sup>. Comments were received via an email set up for this purpose and focused heavily on urging Pace to invest in battery electric buses and/or zero emission buses. Many urged Pace to stop purchasing diesel and CNG vehicles or supported moving away from all fossil fuels. Nearly two dozen environmental and civic advocacy organizations signed onto letters submitted from the Climate Reality Chicago Metro Chapter and the Sierra Club of Illinois. A couple comments received dealt with bus restructuring issues in Schaumburg and Naperville. The Cook County Department of Transportation and Highways also submitted comments and other county DOTs have communicated they are reviewing and may also provide comments in the near future. About two dozen comments were received in total, which does not include those sent directly to the Pace Board of Directors email address.

Pace solicited comments from counties, councils of government, and individual municipalities. Most comments received stated support for the plan overall.

In response to questions from Directors Canning and Smith, Ryan clarified that RTA, Metra, CTA, CMAP, Tollway, and IDOT reviewed the draft plan ahead of its release and submitted a number of comments which were addressed in the version released to the public.

Director Smith said it was important to inquire feedback more directly from community colleges, who are not always represented in councils of government, to which Director Soto agreed. Rocky said Pace will follow up with community colleges and clarified that Driving Innovation is a living document where Pace will constantly solicit feedback from the public, adapting the plan to how technology, landscapes, and travel patterns change continuously. If an entity did not get to comment under the initial period, there will be many chances to provide suggestions.

Director Smith agreed, but said in terms of stakeholder management, it is important to validate that community colleges are stakeholders even if their comments are identical to ones already received. Ryan added that the next step is to prepare a PowerPoint that can be customized for different groups, and to dedicate staff capability towards and engaging with stakeholders.

Ryan highlighted how Driving Innovation now commits to the goal of operating 100% zero emission vehicles by the year 2040. While Pace already had research and planning efforts underway and has actively pursued funding and partnerships for implementing electric fleet and facilities, an actual commitment with an end date was an important missing element. Thanks to public comment, this has been incorporated as a centerpiece of the plan, featured as Pace's first initiative. Dozens of other similar changes were made to use stronger and more direct language about moving away from fossil fuels in the next two decades. Driving Innovation states that CNG technology will not be further expanded beyond the existing South and Northwest plans.

In response to a question from Director Canning, Rocky said for the next five years, Pace will spend \$55 million on electric vehicles. If the goal is zero emissions by 2040, that's 800 vehicles in the next 20 years; at today's prices, that would cost \$800 million for vehicles alone.

Rocky said the overall goal is to lower emissions, and the ideal way to achieve that right now is with electric vehicles. Pace is investing in this technology in our 2022 budget, in the same way we invested in CNG when it was the best alternative fuel source seven years ago. Perhaps better technologies may yet emerge, such as the hydrogen fuel cell. There are still questions about the cost, community infrastructure, and even environmental impact of electric vehicles. How do you mine the lithium for the batteries and what do you do with the batteries when they expire? In Morris, IL a lithium battery disposal warehouse caused a toxic fire.

Rocky said to Director Canning's point, operating an all-electric fleet is possibly a costly venture that will require the support of taxpayers as well as federal, state, and local leaders.

Director Canning asked about streetcar/trolley technology where buses are powered by electric lines running above the street. Erik said the downside is many communities don't like the overhead wires, and when fixed infrastructure is in place, you are limited in terms of routing. Transitioning to equipment that doesn't have that limitation gives Pace more flexibility.

Ryan said Driving Innovation will be presented before the Board in September for approval and provided a preview of future Driving Innovation related planning work:

Systemwide Facilities Plan – This plan will be brought before the Board later this year. With consultant assistance, this major research and planning effort will develop an action plan for

implementing electric vehicles by assessing operational facilities and projecting Pace service bandwidth at key milestones during garage expansion projects.

Network Revitalization Plan – This will be a major undertaking in 2022–2023. Scope of work is currently being developed and will coordinate with the facilities plan and rapid transit program.

I-290 Corridor Study and I-55 Harlem Ave Station Study – Both are expected to start sometime next year.

Director Smith commended the changes made to Driving Innovation in response to environmental concerns. She asked if any changes were made to the sections on Dial-A-Ride, trip-planning technologies, and TNC based on public feedback because that's how riders engage with Pace serviced in McHenry County and other rural areas. Ryan said those programs require more conversations with stakeholders before Pace states anything definitively in a plan. Rocky said he would share details on technology, rideshare, and TNC investments in the 2022 budget.

Ryan presented on the I-294 Tri-State Market Expansion project and the draft result of the related recently completed RTA/Pace I-294 Tri-State Market & Facilities Feasibility Study. For context, Pace decided to study future express bus service and facilities along the Tri-State corridor in response to the Illinois Tollway Central Tri-State project, a multibillion-dollar multiyear construction project to widen I-294, add travel lanes, redesign interchanges, replace the Mile-Long Bridge, and add Flex Lanes in each direction for most of the roadway. The Tri-State experiences heavy volumes of traffic and congestion, thus these improvements may yield greater benefits to Pace buses than the previous I-90 market expansion.

Ryan thanked RTA's community planning program, which funded 80% of Pace's I-294 planning study and administered contracts with a consultant team led by AECOM. Revisions are expected for initial station concepts. Drafts are currently being reviewed by stakeholders, and final revisions will be made after a public survey and other local outreach activities conclude this fall.

Ryan displayed the study area for attendees' viewing. It included the five-mile radius from the centerline of I-90 and I-294 from 159<sup>th</sup> Street in Harvey to Meacham Road in Schaumburg. Ryan noted the area includes most of Cook and DuPage counties and more than 80 individual communities, roughly a quarter of Pace's service area.

Of 32 sites assessed, five were recommended in the final report. Ryan presented the advanced conceptual designs developed for the three most promising nearest term sites recommended for inline bus rapid transit (BRT) stations. He proposed development phases for each:

O'Hare Oasis, Schiller Park – (Phase 1) Among the three sites, this is the most straightforward and cheapest. The concept design involves using existing ramps and access drives to the oasis facilities that previously flanked the roadway. Beyond new bus station platforms and shelters, Pace is proposing new pedestrian infrastructure on the eastern end of the site. Schiller Park has expressed interest in developing the site, creating an opportunity for transit-oriented development. This and a forthcoming study of the nearby Irving Park Rd. interchange is expected to help determine outcomes for the rest of the site.

Cermak Toll Plaza, Oak Brook – (Phase 1) Buses would access north- and southbound platforms via bus-only slip ramps. A more substantial investment, an enclosed pedestrian bridge is proposed to connect the two platforms similar to I-90 at Barrington Rd., as well as a Park-n-Ride along the eastern side of the roadway accessed by a new road leading to Cermak. There may be other opportunities to connect with the western platform from local roadways as the nearby CenterPoint Properties may be redeveloped.

Design details may need to be adjusted, as there are other potential uses for this site. Pace is confident the footprint site conditions are flexible enough to fit the major components that would make the station viable. Pace has confirmed with Tollway staff that the concept may advance pending further discussion on design work.

103<sup>rd</sup> St and Harlem Ave, Chicago Ridge – (Phase 2) Like Cermak, this also includes bus-only slip ramps, platforms, and an enclosed pedestrian bridge. Two Park-n-Ride facilities are proposed on each side of the station with direct pedestrian connections to platforms. The west Park-n-Ride facility, located within a vacant industrial parcel, will be larger and would also serve as a transit center for connecting regular fixed routes, future Pulse lines, and paratransit service.

Pace staff has had initial discussions with Chicago Ridge about the development of the site, but has not been able to acquire the land to initiate. Since the future of the land is unknown and the project has the most expensive price tag, this site was recommended for a phase 2 launch with a timeline to be determined.

Ryan identified the two sites recommended for further study:

Meacham Rd, Schaumburg – Pace is participating in a study conducted by Schaumburg that will further examine the Meacham site with hopes of refining a potential facility design either in the roadway or nearby.

Cicero Ave and 127<sup>th</sup> St, Alsip – This site shows promise from both physical feasibility and market strength perspectives but requires more study to determine a suitable design.

Ryan presented the initial cost estimate for the work required to implement all three phase 1 and 2 stations, a total of \$110 million. The amount Pace is expected to expend out-of-pocket may be as low as \$52–\$63 million. Opening day scenario may involve removing or scaling back certain design elements not essential to the operation of service that would lower costs. Up to \$35 million of Rebuild Illinois state capitol funding may be used towards these station facilities.

Ryan displayed a map of seven proposed service concepts and their connections to seven existing facilities including Park-n-Rides lots, CTA stations, and Pace Transit Centers. The project team assessed ridership potential through 2040 using a computer model developed by the FTA and calibrated for our region by the RTA using local sources of data. Ryan discussed a table depicting those results and factors that impact projected data, noting pre-Covid 2019 ridership data was used for the projection. We don't yet have enough information to know how ridership will look in five or ten years once the corridor is fully developed and running for a few years, but we do expect some of the routes could rank among Pace's top 20 if implemented.

Director Canning inquired about route trip time compared with bus-on-shoulder. Ryan said it's hard to provide those estimates because the Flex Lanes are not yet built. We can only assume a zero-congestion condition, but we also know there will be a short break in the Flex Lanes. A final determination can't be made without going into the field to do timings.

Ryan discussed the costs of operating the route based on a research assessment by the consultant. Implementing all seven concepts with daily and hourly headways spanning from sunrise to later evening equate to \$12.5 million annual operating costs requiring 49 new vehicles. The true cost may be \$10 million and 39 vehicles if only the six top concepts are advanced. This number may be lower after developing bus schedules, blocking trips, and other strategies. Service Planning will finetune trips, frequency spans, and stop locations, and do related work to bring down costs. Electric vehicles could help lower costs as well.

In response to Director Canning's question, Ryan said the Illinois Tollway construction schedule put completion of the project at 2026, and Pace could spend 4 or more years building facilities. This depends on land easements and working with the Tollway and other partners. Implementation could be phased and service could be up and running with one or two facilities.

Ryan illustrated how the corridor may become a critical part of our emerging rapid transit program for connections and transfers. Altogether, the Tri-State corridor proposed from this study would connect four of the five existing or proposed expressway-based service corridors and five out of the seven proposed near-term Pulse lines. Multiple other connections will also be established among the rest of Pace's services. The bottom line finding from this study is the I-294 Tri-State corridor shows very strong potential for Pace express bus service and supports further planning design and stakeholder coordinator efforts to advance.

### **Next Meeting Date**

The next meeting of the Planning Committee will be on Wednesday, November 3, 2021 at 12:00 p.m. at Pace Headquarters, 550 W. Algonquin Rd., Arlington Heights, Illinois.

### **Adjournment**

There being no further business, Chairman Canning asked for a motion and a second to adjourn the meeting.

Director Soto moved, and Director Smith seconded a motion to adjourn the Pace Planning Committee meeting. The motion passed with a unanimous vote. The meeting adjourned at 12:56 p.m.



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Elissa Ledvort  
Secretary, Board of Directors