

Connecting the Loop

By Rich Sampson

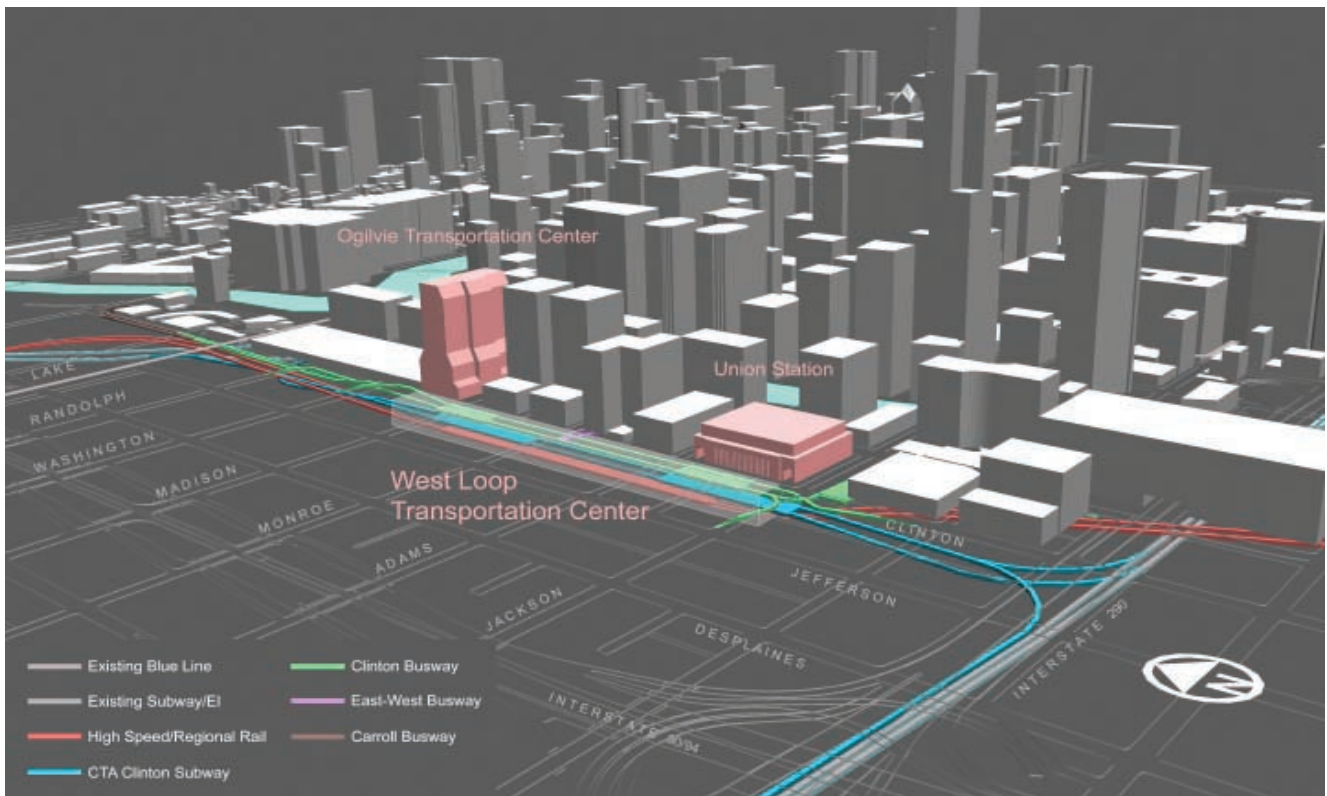


Chicago's railroading legacy has produced a stunning collection of buildings and infrastructure that are at the same time architecturally significant and incredibly useful. In keeping with that tradition, the City of Chicago's Department of Planning and Development, along with the operating agencies of its passenger rail networks – Amtrak, Metra and the Chicago Transit Authority – are working together on plans for a new passenger rail nexus in downtown Chicago.

The West Loop Transportation Center is envisioned to respond to numerous operational challenges limited by facilities available today, and also focus planning and development on the west side of the Chicago River. Passenger rail traffic through Union Station – both intercity and commuter – has always been constrained by the lack of usable run-through tracks. This effectively prohibits trains from the east, for example, reaching destinations to the west, and requires passengers to transfer trains. Meanwhile, the city's two stations west of the river, Union Station and Metra's Ogilvie Transportation Center, do not have convenient access to the Chicago Transit Authority's L and subway system – the closest stop is three blocks east after crossing the river. Additionally, Metra passengers hoping to connect between lines at Union and Ogilvie must battle street traffic or the infamous Chicago weather – sometimes both – to reach their trains.

To overcome these obstacles to better passenger service, Chicago and those three rail entities are working with DLK Civic Design and TransSystems Engineering to plan for a joint transportation facility linking Union and Ogilvie stations with new rail infrastructure buried deep under Clinton Street. The new tracks would be built to high speed rail standards, including the ability to install electric power, and allow Amtrak intercity and Metra

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Map courtesy of DLK Civic Design

commuter rail trains to continue directly through downtown Chicago to serve destinations in the region and beyond. Above that, the Chicago Transit Authority is considering plans to link the northwest and southwest branches of its Blue Line rapid transit using a new tunnel under Clinton Street, which would include new a new station to serve Union and Ogilvie stations. It is also investigating a new concept of a downtown circulator service – likely light rail or bus rapid transit, which would also call underneath Clinton Street. Finally, a top layer of station facilities, retail shops and other amenities would act as a foyer to the massive complex.

While such a substantial undertaking, projected to be nearly 1200 feet from end-to-end, could easily become mired in inevitable chaos and offer little architectural distinction, the partners on the project have placed a priority on a design that is both distinguished and functional. Linear atriums at every level from the street surface through four stories to the railroad tracks below would funnel natural

light throughout the complex, while innovative lighting and air movement strategies would help create a open and airy feel to the underground structure. Strategically positioned elevators and escalators would allow quick, direct access to the deepest levels, while also offering easy linkages between all the sections. Additionally, connections to street-level buildings would be established to allow passengers even more convenient access to the facility.

Currently, the City has elevated the project for inclusion in its Central Area Plan for downtown, while all the parties are formulating a strategy to attract investment from federal, state and local sources. By striving towards a transportation complex that would be a hallmark of intermodality, urban development, functionality and architectural renown, the participants in the West Loop Transportation Center are setting a course for a building befitting the proud traditions of Chicago. 



Graphics courtesy of DLK Civic Design

