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Transit planning, access, and justice: Evolving visions of bus rapid transit and the Chicago street

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ABSTRACT

Because transport planning distributes accessibility and mobility, it is increasingly understood to involve questions of fairness and justice. Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) is a technique for expanding transit access through redesign of existing roadways with dedicated bus lanes and spaced stations for rapid operation, with associated pedestrian improvements. Such innovations prompt intriguing questions. How does BRT planning reimagine accessibility to transport networks and urban streets, and with what implications for socio-spatial relations and justice? We analyze plans, public debates, and interviews with key stakeholders in a proposed BRT corridor along Chicago's diverse and busy Ashland Avenue. Results show how BRT planning "rethinks" transit networks through purposeful reallocation of street spaces, interpreted relative to efficiency and equity. But if BRT planners promote transit improvements and "complete" streets as questions of fairness, they confront engineering and business interests in vehicular mobility and parking, highlighting enduring obstacles to multimodal accessibility and mobility justice.

1. Introduction

Transportation planners today look beyond automobility towards cost-effective alternatives for diverse modes and populations, promoting urban sustainability and livability. These policy challenges are paralleled by scholarly reconsideration of mobility, not merely as object of infrastructure engineering but also realm of socio-spatial politics, rights, and justice. Few things better embody these shifts than the emergence of Bus Rapid Transit (BRT), a technique for cost-effectively transforming existing roadways into high-quality transit corridors with metro-level capacity, by providing dedicated bus lanes and off-board fare collection, limited stops, and quick operation (ITDP, 2016). Not only expanding access to rapid transit networks, reallocation of vehicular spaces to alternative modes and enhancement of pedestrian facilities helps "complete" streets (National Complete Streets Coalition, 2016). Such transformations of urban mobility and access raise important conceptual and practical issues about how BRT reimagines transit networks and street spaces, and the implications for access and mobility justice.

Traditionally quantitative and positivistic fields of transport geography and engineering have approached urban transportation in terms of physical accessibility to goods, services, and destinations (Golub and Martens, 2014; Fransen et al., 2015; Vale, 2015). Engineers define accessibility as "connections to adjacent properties" (Golub and Martens, 2014; Fransen et al., 2015; Vale, 2015) and even "operational efficiency…and convenience for the motorist" (AASHTO, 2004, p. xliv). But sensitivity to uneven "politics of mobility" (Cresswell, 2010), particularly surrounding access to transit and multimodal complete streets (McCann and Rynne, 2010; Zehngebot and Peiser, 2014), increasingly prompts questions of equity and social and environmental justice in transportation (Bullard and Johnson, 1997; Farrington and Farrington, 2005; Martens, 2006; Sen, 2008; Beyazit, 2011; Barrett, 2013; Hartman and Prytherch, 2015).

As growing scholarship expands our understanding of accessibility and transit planning generally and BRT specifically (Tiwari and Jain, 2012; Davis, 2013; Anderson and Ellis, 2014; Casas and Delmelle, 2014; Clifton et al., 2014), emerging focus on social justice in transportation and planning (Sen, 2008; Manaugh et al., 2015) prompts important questions. How does BRT planning reimagine transit networks and street spaces? How does BRT reallocate access to both transit networks and the street? And how do planners and other key stakeholders understand such proposed redistributions in relation to fairness and perhaps "justice?"

One very good example of the complexities of such planning is a 26 km, north-south BRT line proposed by Chicago Transit Authority (CTA) for Ashland Avenue in Chicago, Illinois, U.S.A., one of the city's

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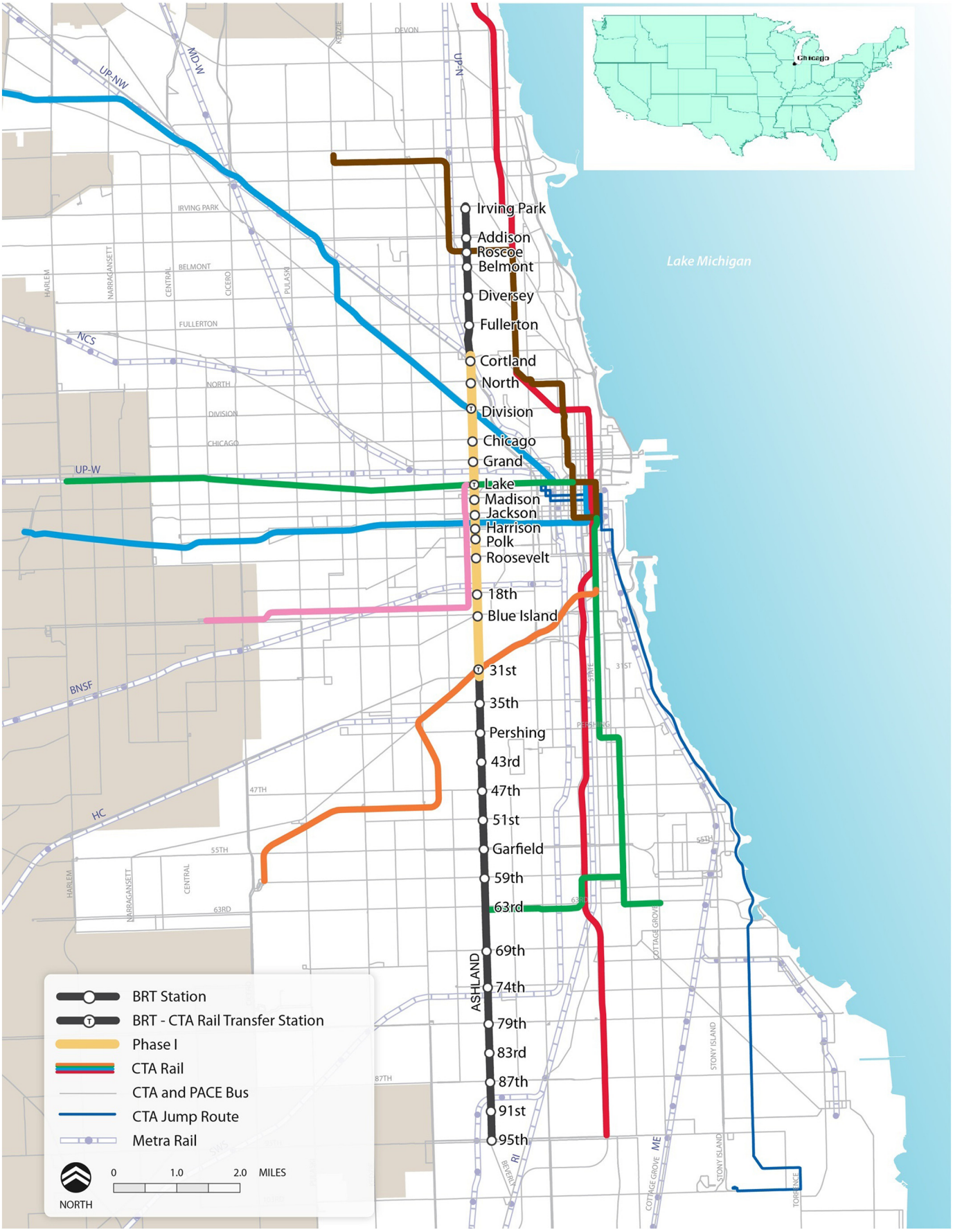

Fig. 1. Proposed Ashland Avenue Bus Rapid Transit would complement Chicago's hub-and-spoke elevated railway system.
Source: CTA, 2013a.