

CTA Blue Line Forest Park Branch Vision Study Approaching Conclusion

The Chicago Transit Authority (CTA) initiated the Blue Line Forest Park Branch Vision Study as an opportunity to examine the branch as a whole and determine the best way to serve future ridership. CTA looked at the needs of the transit corridor, specifically evaluating existing infrastructure conditions, transit markets and service patterns to provide recommendations for the branch going forward.

Starting in 2009, the Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT) began its I-290 (Eisenhower Expressway) Phase I Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) Study within the multimodal corridor adjacent to the CTA Forest Park Branch of the Blue Line. When CTA began the Vision Study in 2013, CTA and IDOT coordinated planning efforts as well as CTA participation in IDOT project outreach along the corridor.

[A map showing the study area: The Study area captures the complete Blue Line from Clinton to Forest Park, and also allows for the evaluation of alternatives that could continue to Mannheim Road in coordination with I-290 EIS study.]

Specifically, a red box delineates the study area from 1 block east of Clinton station at Canal Street (east) to Mannheim Road (west), Madison Street (north) to Roosevelt Road (south).]

{Sidebar} Vision Study Process

[An image is included showing the front doors of the newly modernized Peoria entrance at the UIC-Halsted Station on the Blue Line Forest Park Branch.]

Step 1: Data Collection and Existing Conditions Assessment

This stage of the study development process included: Assessing existing conditions and deficiencies within the study area corridor; reaching out to local stakeholders and other interested parties about the study; and hosting a public open house to identify study area issues/concerns.

Step 2: Develop Conceptual Alternatives

This stage of the study consisted of the development and analysis of project alternatives. The goal of this step was to identify a series of alternatives and potential solutions that are suitable to meet study and stakeholder goals that were identified in Step One.

Step 3: Evaluate and Refine Alternatives

The process continued with the evaluation and refinement of the remaining corridor service alternatives.

[The bottom of the page includes a schedule graphic that reflects the timeline of the project, including several tasks and their respective work dates, as follows:

- Data Collection: Spring 2013 through Fall 2013
- Station Concepts Development: Summer 2013 through Fall 2013
- Corridor Service Evaluation: Fall 2013 through Winter 2013/14
- Station Concepts Evaluation: Fall 2013 through Winter 2013/14

Public and Agency Outreach Meetings are indicated with a red mark in Fall 2013, Winter 2013/2014, and 2017, which also coincides with the Study Completion.]

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Goals of the Vision Study

[A blurred image depicting a moving CTA train is included.]

The Forest Park Branch of the Blue Line is nearly 60 years old and beyond its useful life. The goals of the Forest Park Branch Vision Study include:

- Improve travel times and minimize slow zones
- Improve station access, ADA access, safety, comfort and convenience
- Attract additional ridership
- Spur transit-friendly development throughout the corridor, especially as it relates to community interests and needs
- Improve the customer experience at the stations by limiting noise and weather impacts
- Provide low-maintenance and cost-effective solutions.

Current Conditions

[Three images are included in this section, including (1) an eastbound Forest Park Branch train coming out of a tunnel and into the track segment near Cicero station that runs in the highway median, (2) a CTA station platform and canopy, and (3) a picture of the Ogden entrance headhouse and IMD station platform, as seen from Ogden Ave.]

On an average weekday the Blue Line Forest Park Branch carries over 32,000 passengers - nearly 10 million passengers per year.

- More than 20% of the branch operates under slow zones because of track conditions – more track miles than any other branch in the system. Slow zones cause delays, unreliable service and longer travel times for daily commuters.
- Only 10% percent of the track system has been replaced, leaving 90% from the original installation in 1958. The age of this infrastructure leads to poor drainage and the gradual deterioration to rail ties, tracks and ballast.
- Many stations are antiquated and are not accessible to customers with disabilities.
- Many stations and bridges are approaching the end of their useful lives.
- The design of the station platforms adjacent to I-290 highway leaves customers exposed to vehicle noise and harsh weather elements. Pedestrian access to the station access is constrained by the highway access and narrow sidewalks.

- The CTA Yard and Shop at the end of the branch are approaching the end of their useful lives and do not efficiently support operations necessary to meet current demand levels on the Blue Line as a whole.

Comprehensive Stakeholder Outreach

[An image of five diverse people standing together looking over some papers, showing people participating in an outreach process together, is included.]

The extensive outreach effort over the last few years has resulted in valuable stakeholder feedback at each step of the Blue Line Forest Park Branch Vision Study process. Stakeholder comments have informed CTA recommendations and all Public Meeting comments were addressed by CTA (see comment responses on project website). Individuals on the study mailing list received invitations in the mail or via e-mail announcing upcoming meetings and website updates.

An integrated infographic with meetings details is included [across the bottom of page 2 and 3] including the outreach facts below:

- (2) Public meetings (with IDOT)
- (6) IDOT I-290 Corridor Advisory Group Meetings
- (7) IDOT stakeholder briefings
- (2) Public Hearings (with IDOT)
- Numerous CTA stakeholder briefings
- CTA City of Chicago Open House]

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Recommendations: Shaped by Stakeholder Outreach

Based on the findings of the Blue Line Forest Park Branch Vision Study, the CTA recommends reconstructing the entire Forest Park Branch.

- Rehabilitate infrastructure, starting with track work (addressing persistent slow zones and the need for continual maintenance in order to delay increases to slow zone totals)
- Propose wider station platforms and elevator access for each station on the branch
- Propose design features to improve customer experience, including improved noise and weather protection and consistent aesthetics between stations
- Include a turn-back track at Illinois Medical District to accommodate construction phasing
- Redesign the Forest Park Branch Terminal, Yard and Shop within the current parcel to modernize the maintenance areas as well as bus and pedestrian connections

[An image of three people standing to the sides of one person writing on post-it notes on a drawing board, showing people participating in an outreach process, is included.]

The specific service recommendations are:

- Bring service back up to design speeds.
- Maintain existing two-track configuration.
- Continue to perform interim slow zone maintenance work on branch as needed (short-term).

Specific station designs will be developed as the project advances. In general, the study recommends keeping existing station layouts for double entry stations. Auxiliary entrances will be added to single entry stations, including Cicero, Pulaski and Western, to increase access to those stations.

As the Forest Park Branch shares the right-of-way with I-290, operating within the median and directly to the south of the expressway throughout the corridor, recommended improvements for the Blue Line Forest Park Branch will continue to be planned in coordination with IDOT's current planning and future phases for the reconstruction of I-290.

[Two station renderings are shown here:

A draft rendering of the entrance to Austin station is shown. There is a plaza in front of the station with a partial covering. There are green trees, a bike rack and many pedestrians in the image.

A draft rendering of the platform level at Austin station is shown. The platform is wider than existing without any barriers, allowing a long open view of many transit users. There is a partial concrete station covering.]

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[An image showing a moving CTA train on the elevated track structure with a building in the background is shown.]

Next Steps

This study utilized planning funds obtained by CTA, in partnership with the Village of Oak Park and IDOT.

The CTA will continue working with elected officials, local, state, and federal agencies to secure the necessary funding to keep this project progressing. In order to move from study to construction, the project will need to transition from the planning phase to the project development phase, which includes environmental analyses in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA) and preliminary engineering. Through that process, stakeholders will have additional opportunities to provide feedback in regard to improvements to the CTA Blue Line Forest Park Branch.

[Images of the CTA, IDOT, and Oak Park logos are shown.]

Project Cost Estimates for Potential Construction

Construction start is contingent on identifying funding. Costs are based on conceptual planning study which will be refined in the project development process and are estimated at \$1.7B in 2016. Costs include:

- Track and related infrastructure;
- Reconstruction of Forest Park Yard, Shop and Terminal;
- Upgrade stations from UIC-Halsted to Forest Park; and
- Six power substations.

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CTA Connections on YouTube - youtube.com/ctaconnections

CTA on Flickr - flickr.com/ctaweb

[Social media logos are shown next to each respective media outlet.]

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