

# Connecting the Suburban Dots

Hub-and-spoke transit systems reflect old commuting patterns. A few metro areas are planning suburb-to-suburb rail lines.

BY ROB GURWITT

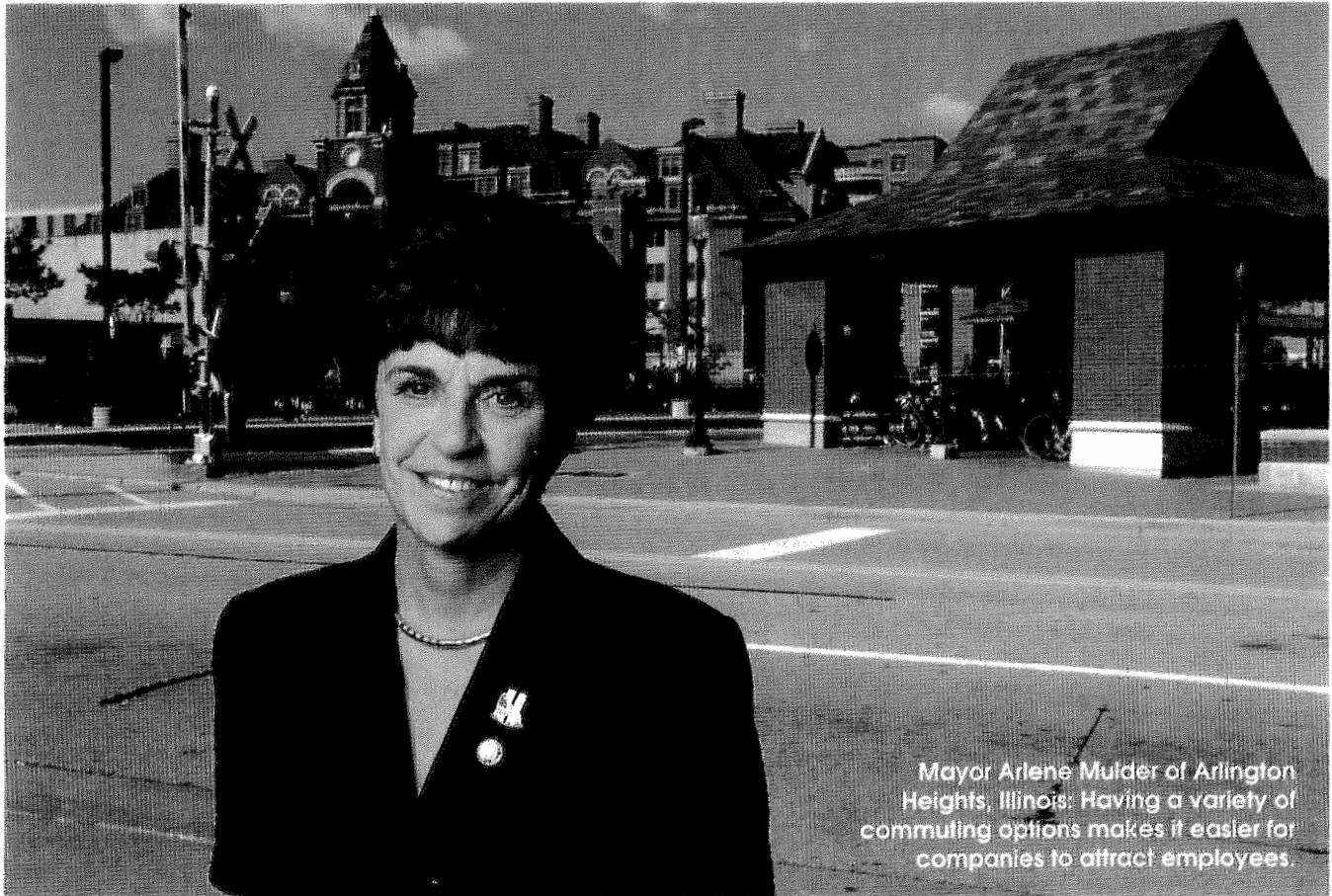
**S**ometime in the next 10 years, if all goes according to plan, you'll be able to board a train in a far western Chicago suburb and ride all the way to...well...another far western suburb. You'll be able to get to Chicago too, but that's not really the point. The so-called STAR Line, to be run by the regional rail agency known as

Metra, is designed to let a transit rider go directly from one of the region's fast-growing western or northwestern suburbs to another, without first having to travel into the city. This makes it, oddly enough, one of the bolder transportation experiments in the country.

Transit options exist in the suburbs, of course. There are buses, van pools, para-

transit—all the alternatives that transit advocates wish commuters would use more often. None of them has made a serious dent in automobile use, however, and none really gets at the toughest issue in transit planning: developing a viable public transit "beltway"—or circumferential—system. Transit in this country, and rail transit in particular, follows a hub-and-spoke pattern, with the central city at the core and lines radiating out from there.

In this, it lags well behind our living patterns. During the 1990s, for instance, the Chicago metropolitan area grew by 11.6 percent, adding 860,000 people, and although Chicago enjoyed a portion of that growth, most of it went to the suburbs. Moreover, much of the region's job growth has taken place beyond city limits as well. Towns such as Schaumburg and neighboring Hoffman Estates have become major employment centers, with Motorola headquartered in the former and Sears in the latter. Nationally, the patterns are similar: In the largest metropolitan areas, suburbs in the 1990s grew at a rate twice that of central cities and emerged as shopping and work destina-



Mayor Arlene Mulder of Arlington Heights, Illinois: Having a variety of commuting options makes it easier for companies to attract employees.

RALF-FINN HESTOFT

tions in their own right. For most people, though, the only way to get from one to the next remains the car.

Naperville, Illinois, for instance, sits about 30 miles from downtown Chicago, and every workday morning, says Mayor George Pradel, "we pour cars out of our city into the next one." He adds, "Getting from point A to point B takes a while. It's not gridlock, but so many people are using the highways. Transportation is our number one problem, with the growth we have."

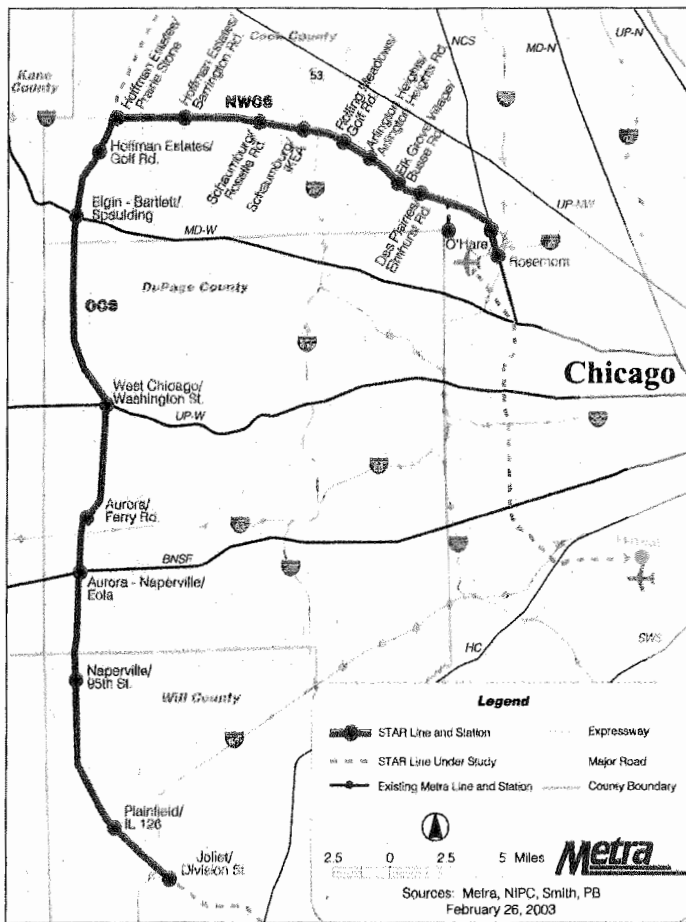
You can understand, then, why Pradel and other mayors whose towns lie along the proposed STAR Line have so enthusiastically embraced the idea. "We really want this to happen," Pradel says.

And it's likely it will. The STAR Line enjoys strong support from local governments—including the city of Chicago, since it would help connect city residents with the rich suburban job markets—and from regional government councils. Suburban employers like the idea, as well. And perhaps most important, a major portion of the proposed line runs through the district of U.S. House Speaker Dennis Hastert, who has announced his backing for the project in this fall's federal transportation bill.

Yet the truth is, no one knows for certain whether the line will prove to be a huge success or a bust. If riders materialize in the numbers that backers anticipate, its estimated \$1.2 billion cost might seem a bargain as the line spurs new development, relieves congestion and helps employers attract workers. Or it could turn out to be a very expensive way of demonstrating, once again, that it's almost impossible to persuade significant numbers of American suburbanites to leave their cars behind when they head off for work or shopping.

### DUMBBELL-SHAPED TRIPS

There is a reason that transportation professionals tend to be dubious about big suburb-to-suburb transit projects. It's known as the "many-to-many" problem: Commuters traveling from one suburb to



### The proposed Meira STAR (Suburban Transit Access Route) Line would link the fast-growing suburbs west of Chicago.

another start their trips in many different places and end them in many different places, although for a portion of their commute they may be forced to share the same stretch of roadway with everyone else. "You end up with dumbbell-shaped trips," says Dave Schulz, director of Northwestern University's Infrastructure Technology Institute and a former county executive in Milwaukee.

Moreover, in a society whose building patterns revolve around the automobile, it's pretty difficult to create a transit system that competes with the car for convenience. "It's not a good thing that we've condemned ourselves through development patterns to almost total auto dependency," says Schulz. "But in fact, the automobile is the most comfortable, convenient form of transportation devised by the mind of man, and it's getting better all the time. With climate control, stereos and all that, it makes the drive relatively painless."

The dynamics are different, of course, when it's a matter of getting between the

suburbs and the central city. For one thing, the headaches involved in driving into the city—in particular, the risk of gridlock and the certainty of paying for parking—make using transit more attractive. For another, even if a large portion of the commuting population still drives, the numbers of commuters willing to use transit to get to the same central destinations are such that they can undergird the expense of, say, a rail line. And finally, the politics of transit are more clear-cut when it involves the central city. "When you're talking radial transit to downtown, you get a lot of support from the central-city players," comments Alan Pisarski, a transportation consultant based near Washington, D.C. "When you talk suburb to suburb, it's much harder to generate that political support, because there aren't the powerful proponents to

make it happen." Not surprisingly, the more expensive a transit option, the more fraught the politics become.

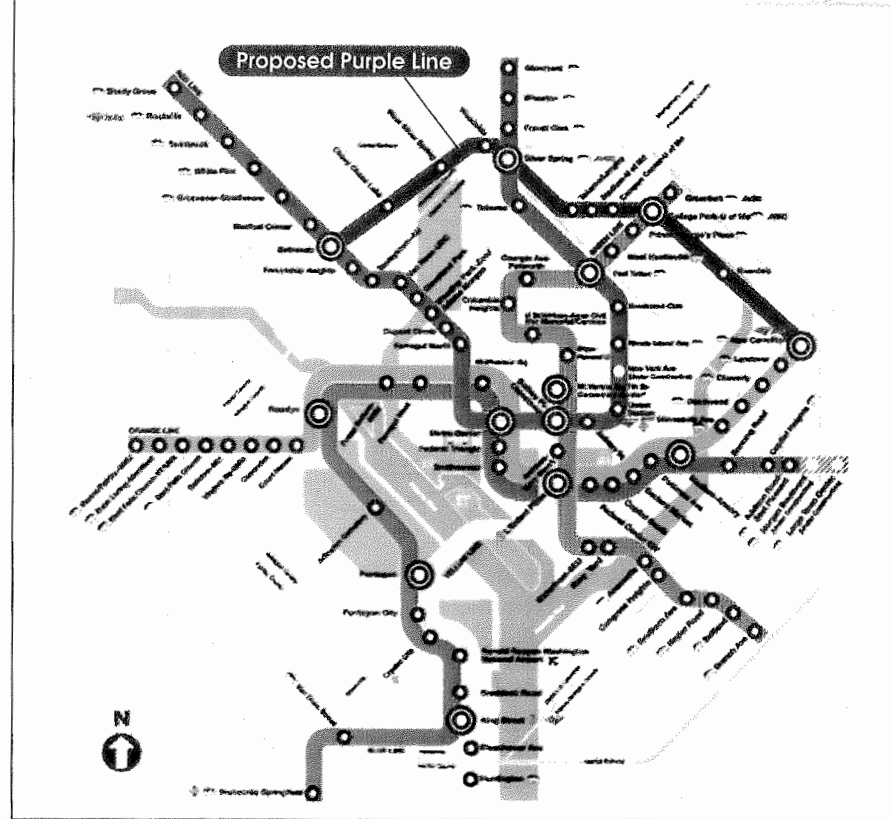
A case in point might be the so-called "Purple Line"—currently referred to by the state of Maryland as the "Bi-County Transitway"—that has long been proposed for linking several suburbs of Washington, D.C. For years, Montgomery County, Maryland's master plan has called for a rail line running between two of its communities, Bethesda and Silver Spring; in recent decades, both have seen enormous residential, commercial and employment growth. In 1998, County Executive Douglas M. Duncan and then-Governor Parris N. Glendening floated the idea of a subway "beltway" that would ring the capital region; the notion went nowhere, but Montgomery County pressed ahead with planning for its own circumferential section, with the state promoting an additional segment through neighboring Prince George's County.

"The Washington rail system is a series of spokes designed to take people from the suburbs into the center city, which made sense when the subway system was built," says David Weaver, spokesman for Montgomery County's executive. "But com-

muting patterns have changed. These days, 65 percent of the people who live in Montgomery County also work here. The bottom line is, in order to better use the transit system, we have to change direction both literally and figuratively in terms of where the subway goes."

Until recently, the chief debates had to do with exactly where the rail line would run and whether it would be part of the Metro subway system or a separate light-rail line. Meanwhile, Glendening, a Democrat, was replaced after the 2002 elections by Robert L. Ehrlich Jr., a Republican. In March, Ehrlich's transportation secretary, Robert Flanagan, confounded local officials by announcing he wanted to explore another option—"bus rapid transit," or BRT, which uses dedicated lanes on existing roadways to allow buses to move faster than automobile traffic.

"We need a project that meets the travel demands in this corridor but is done in the least expensive way possible," says Henry Kay, director of planning at the Maryland Transit Administration. "The ratio of cost and ridership on a [rail] project that relies heavily on tunneling and exclusive rights of way was just getting out of sight. We're reopening the draft environmental impact statement [done by the state when it was considering a rail line] to examine more robust bus-based alternatives." Dedicated suburb-to-suburb transit routes are relatively unexplored ground, so reliable cost-benefit models are hard to come by. Still, says Kay, "I can promise



BRT will be cheaper than light rail, but I can't promise how much."

Meanwhile, officials in Montgomery County have made no effort to hide their dismay. "Rail, heavy or light, is the preferred mode," says Weaver. "When you go from hard rail to bus, it's a real letdown. And we already have significant bus options along that corridor. It's not much to go from what we have currently to bus rapid transit. We would argue, there's no reason you shouldn't consider both."

**Rail vs. bus: Fiscal straits have altered the debate over adding a 'Purple Line' to Washington, D.C.'s subway system.**

The problem Weaver and others foresee is that buses, no matter how rapid, will have a much harder time competing for commuters' allegiance than trains. Maryland's Henry Kay argues that this is not necessarily so. "That may or may not be true," he says. "I think it depends on the quality of the bus service and rail service." But the widespread perception among suburban politicians is that there's no contest.

"It could be argued that the more cost-effective way to do suburb-to-suburb is buses and bus rapid transit," says Al Larson, the mayor of Schaumburg, Illinois, and a prime mover behind the STAR Line. "The difficulty is getting people out of their cars and into buses. You can get people to ride trains."

**EXISTING TRACKS**

And as transit planners are discovering, you can mitigate the costs of rail if you can find existing tracks that will meet your needs. In the Washington County suburbs of Portland, Oregon, for instance, the regional transit agency, TriMet, is making steady progress on a five-station, suburb-to-suburb line using existing freight tracks. The line would run between the booming communities of Wilsonville and Beaverton, using self-

**SONY HAS YOUR REMOTE MONITORING SOLUTION!**

IF YOU NEED IP REMOTE ACCESS, SIMPLE OPERATION, RELIABLE PERFORMANCE, HIGH RESOLUTION IMAGES, MULTIPLE USER-ACCESS, AND YOU NEED IT IN REAL TIME... THEN YOU NEED SONY'S NEW IP VIDEO CAMERAS

AVAILABLE THROUGH ELCOR UNDER SONY GSA CONTRACT!

**ELCOR INTERNATIONAL INC**

New York City 77-40 104th Street Fresh Meadows, NY 11365 Toll Free 800-352-6769 fax 718-380-9276	Nassau, L.I. 56 Engineers Drive Hicksville, NY 11801 Toll Free 877-228-8511 Fax 516-681-2268	Suffolk, L.I. 1820 Pond Road Ronkonkoma, NY 11779 Toll Free 877-352-6765 Fax 631-671-5534	New Jersey 7 Just Road Fairfield, NJ 07004 Toll Free 877-352-6705 Fax 973-882-3023
--	--	---	--

**LIVE DEMO AT:**  
[WWW.ELCORVIDEO.COM](http://WWW.ELCORVIDEO.COM)

**SONY security**  
**GSA**  
Federal Supply Contract

propelled diesel cars, and connect with the regional light-rail system in Beaverton. "Washington County is one of the fastest growing areas in the region," says Mary Fetsch, TriMet's communications director, "and this is our heaviest-traveled corridor. We've had a lot of success with our transit system as we've expanded—every rail project we've built has been on time and budget and has exceeded ridership projections—so there's a strong belief this will work." The \$124 million project has already gotten several federal planning grants and is expected to open in 2006.

A more ambitious effort is underway in the Minneapolis-St. Paul region, where a proposal will go before the legislature next session to fund the "Northstar Corridor," a commuter rail line that would run along existing Burlington Northern-Santa Fe freight tracks. The line is not circumferential—it would run between St. Cloud, Minnesota, and the Twin Cities—but it would cover 82 miles of the most rapidly growing segment of the metropolitan area. With major Twin Cities employers starting to locate along the corridor, it would help both suburbanites and city-dwellers commute to suburban jobs, in addition to bringing suburbanites into the central city.

Its strength, backers believe, is that it is both cheaper than a BRT system—because the rails are in place, whereas new busway lanes would have to be built—and more attractive to commuters. "If you add together capital costs and operating costs over 15 years," says Tim Yantos, project director for the Northstar Corridor Development Authority, "Northstar is \$515 million and a busway would be \$769 million. The truth is, we wouldn't be looking at rail unless the railway was in place and you could go 80 miles an hour to downtown Minneapolis. Rail makes sense because the tracks are in place." The project has had federal support but in 2002 was turned down for bonding by the state legislature; its backers failed to get any new funding this year, and Republican Governor Tim Pawlenty has put off deciding whether to back it until a new legislative report on the project comes out next year.

## REGIONAL COOPERATION

By far the boldest proposal for suburb-to-suburb rail, however, is the 65-mile-long STAR Line. It is, in a sense, a hybrid: One portion, running northwest from

O'Hare Airport along I-90, would require new construction; the rest, running south from Hoffman Estates to Joliet, would run along rails owned by the Elgin, Joliet & Eastern freight line.

The idea is an offshoot of an eight-year-long effort by the mayors of five communities along the I-90 corridor—including Schaumburg, Hoffman Estates and Elk Grove Village—to find a way of

choked with traffic—it's over capacity eight hours a day. So it's very difficult to get people in and out of the area in an efficient manner."

As logical as some sort of transit effort might have seemed, when the group of mayors tried to get the idea included in the region's 2020 transportation plan, they were turned down. "We were promised it would be included for future

## The STAR Line project has momentum because suburbanites are pressuring their leaders to find a solution to congestion.

relieving congestion. These towns, once typical pillars of residential suburbia, have urbanized at a rapid pace over the past 15 years or so—they now host over 600,000 jobs, with 100,000 of those in Elk Grove Village Industrial Park alone. "The Northwest Tollway is the main route through there," says Larry Bury, transportation director for the Northwest Municipal Conference, which has helped coordinate the transit effort, "and it's

study," says Schaumburg's Al Larson, "so we asked, 'Who's going to study it?' There was no answer, so we said we'd engage a consultant and pay for a study." At that point, the Regional Transportation Authority agreed to step in and fund the effort, and the planning group expanded to include five more communities, including Chicago. Meanwhile, a separate effort had been underway among the communities lying along the

INTERNATIONAL CITY/COUNTY MANAGEMENT ASSOCIATION

# ICMA Bookstore & MORE

Your Local Government Resource

- E-Documents
- Resources for Instructors
- Tips for New Local Government Managers
- Free excerpts from ICMA resources
- Expanded Search Function
- ICMA Best Sellers
- And as before you'll find...

- Online specials and sales
- Safe and secure online credit card ordering
- ICMA's newest resources
- Complete listing of all ICMA publications, subscriptions, and professional development resources

Sign up for *ICMA InfoWire* free e-mail newsletter tailored to your needs

*ICMA InfoWire* features articles, publication excerpts, special offers, and more!

Visit [bookstore.icma.org](http://bookstore.icma.org) to subscribe now and get useful information and news on the topics you select

International City/County Management Association  
[icma.org](http://icma.org)

tracks; last spring, the two groups to join forces and create one task to push ahead with planning. It's a suburban legend that suburban communities are always at each other's throats," says Larson. "But it's not. There's been real cooperation in the years."

When the level of growth they've seen in recent years, any one of the mayors along the proposed line can make a case for it. They cite not just the current levels of congestion but the hope that rail transit in the suburbs would allow that growth to continue without over-burdening their communities. "It used to be that you'd get a road and 25 years later you'd get your road," says Arlene Mulder, the mayor of Arlington Heights, which is a few miles west of O'Hare. "Now, you change jobs, and companies upsize and downsize. You used to move to live near where you worked, but these days, you're moving every two or three years. You can't uproot your children. So if we give people more options for commuting, suburban communities realize it's an asset for

attracting employees. Those who need to drive will still do that, but the roads will be less congested, because many will choose the faster route of transit."

### DENSITY DEBATES

For the STAR Line to work, though, several things will have to happen. The first is that communities will have to plan for a lot of parking at train stations; as Northwestern's Dave Schulz puts it, "If you don't have a guaranteed or almost guaranteed parking place, it really affects your mode-choice decision."

But providing ample parking must vie with another goal of the STAR Line's suburban supporters: increasing densities near their train stations, and encouraging "transit-oriented development" where it seems appropriate. The problem is that in older suburbs such as Arlington Heights, which already has begun to host high-rise condominium developments, new retail venues, restaurants and theaters, finding the space to provide parking for commuters is growing more difficult. And in the more traditionally suburban commu-

nities farther west, increasing densities significantly—which would enable some portion of the commuting population to live within walking distance of the train station—is a contentious issue. "People in the suburbs don't want that kind of development, because they view it as threatening; anytime you use the word 'density,' their eyes glaze over and they think, 'Cabrini Green,'" says Schulz, referring to Chicago's infamous high-rise public housing project.

Still, it is also true that the reason the STAR Line project has built up so much momentum is that suburbanites are putting enormous political pressure on their leaders to find a solution to congestion. Metra's radial rail lines have seen heavy ridership, and the circumferential line's backers are certain that the demand will be there. "I think it's a safe bet out here in the Chicago region," says Larry Bury, "that if you build it, they will come." Given the political backing that the STAR Line has developed, it seems only a matter of time until we'll find out whether he's right. **G**

## IMN PUBLIC FINANCE CONFERENCE EVENTS SCHEDULE 2003

### Inaugural New England Public Finance Conference

October 30-31, 2003 Boston, MA

### Second Annual Illinois Public Finance Conference

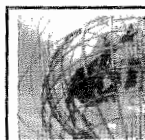
November 10-11, 2003 Chicago, IL

### Inaugural Puerto Rico Public Finance Conference

December 8-9, 2003 San Juan, Puerto Rico

### The Inaugural National Native American Public Finance Conference

February 18-20th, 2004 Palm Springs, CA



For More Information, Please Visit:

[www.imn.org/gmm/](http://www.imn.org/gmm/)

Email: [mail@imn.org](mailto:mail@imn.org)

Call: (212) 768-2800 Ext. 1

Fax: (212) 768-2484