



McHenry County Division of Transportation

Celebrating 100 Years, 1913-2013

Each month this year, a new article celebrating the 100 year anniversary of the McHenry County Division of Transportation will be featured in the Northwest Herald. The eighth article, printed on September 3rd, talked about transit services in McHenry County. Watch for the ninth article on roadway signs to be published at the end of September.

Transit Services in McHenry County

To envision the future role of transit in the County, it helps to remember the past. Transit has always been an important part of McHenry County's history. The Chicago, St. Paul and Fond du Lac Railroad began providing commuter rail service between Chicago and Janesville, WI during the 1850s, with stops in the small towns of Cary, Crystal Lake, Woodstock and Harvard. Even though there were only two daily passenger trains each way, the County's population grew by almost 50% during this period, from under 15,000 in 1850 to over 22,000 by 1860. Additionally, trolley services were established that allowed for transit from as far south as Elgin, through Huntley, Union, Marengo and out west to Belvidere. There was also trolley service running from Harvard to Delevan. Other trolley services were planned (Woodstock to McHenry), but never came to fruition as the automobile fad took McHenry County and America by storm. The Fox River Valley Railroad (now the Prairie Trail) was also built during this time, connecting Elgin with Algonquin, Crystal Lake, McHenry and Richmond. In 1871 this railroad line was extended north to Lake Geneva, allowing families to commute into the City while their homes were rebuilt following the Great Chicago Fire. Even after the line's service had ceased, with rails and ties removed, the railroad held the rights for future rail service someday and leased the land to the McHenry County Conservation District to create the Prairie Trail. Since 1984, Metra took over rail service through an agreement with the Union Pacific Railroad to continue commuter rail service between McHenry County and Chicago.

Bus service in McHenry County has been provided by Pace Suburban Bus System since its creation in 1984. McHenry County currently has three fixed bus routes, the 806 between Crystal Lake and Fox Lake, the 807 between Woodstock and McHenry, and the 808 between Harvard and Crystal Lake. In addition, there are various dial-a-ride services that require riders to call ahead to schedule a trip. Dial-a-rides began as a way to provide transportation for seniors and people with disabilities within a small geographic area – typically a municipality or township. This structure worked well for years but eventually it became clear that these independent services were not meeting the transportation needs of many McHenry County residents. Beginning in February of 2012, the County worked with Pace and the local service providers to coordinate the dial-a-rides in Crystal Lake, McHenry and Woodstock by creating one phone number to call, standardizing service hours and fare structures, and allowing for travel between the communities and several townships. This new service is known as MCRide (pronounced M-C-Ride) and is available for anyone, regardless of age, income level or trip purpose. Many Townships in the County still offer their own dial-a-ride transportation for seniors and people with disabilities.

As part of the ongoing McHenry County 2040 Long Range Transportation Plan, several new transit projects have been identified and brought forward to the public for consideration. So far, the project with the most support in all areas of McHenry County has been the upgrades to the Metra Union Pacific Northwest Line. The upgrades would include more frequent train service, construction of coach yards in Woodstock and Johnsburg, as well as new stations in Johnsburg, Prairie Grove, and Woodstock. The capacity in peak hours would increase by 63%, and over 1,000,000 trips would be added to the line each year. Another proposed Metra project, the extension of the Milwaukee District West Line from Elgin to Huntley, Union, and Marengo, has also secured strong support from residents living in those areas of the County.

In order to bridge the gap between the transit services currently available and the pressing needs identified in the southeastern corner of the County, three new bus routes have been proposed in the County's 2040 Transit Plan. One bus route would travel along Randall Road, connecting the Crystal Lake Metra Station with the Elgin Transportation Center, as well as the numerous employment, shopping and residential areas in between. Another proposed bus route would travel along Illinois Route 31 between the Crystal Lake Metra Station, downtown Algonquin and the Elgin Transportation Center, with stops at the Spring Hill Mall. Finally, a bus route is proposed along Algonquin Road between downtown Huntley and downtown Algonquin, allowing for connections between the other proposed routes.

More frequent Metra service and additional bus routes will meet the needs of many residents. But meeting the needs of everyone, including those that cannot walk to a bus or train stop, will require expanded and coordinated dial-a-ride transit services as the County's population continues to grow and age. The planning process and public comment to date identified the area between Huntley and Algonquin and an area between Richmond and Fox Lake as key areas to provide more dial-a-ride service.

We are very interested in what transportation needs you think are important in the County. Please take time to rank and comment on these proposed transit projects by visiting the 2040 Plan website at www.2040mchenrycountyplan.org. Happy and Safe Travels!

