



Metra Executive Director/CEO Don Orseno explains to reporters how snow and ice from a passing train can fall into a switch and prevent it from working properly.

Metra prepares for winter

As the temperature drops, Metra assures its riders that it has taken a variety of steps this year to be better equipped to deal with cold and snowy weather and better prepared to deliver critical information to its passengers.

In addition to its usual winter preparation efforts, Metra has acquired new snow-fighting equipment, upgraded its website and made other changes that will improve its response and performance in severe weather and make it easier for riders to plan ahead or be informed of real-time changes or delays.

"Nobody wants a repeat of last winter – the coldest and snowiest winter since Metra was formed in 1984. We believe the steps we have taken leave us and our riders better prepared for winter's punch," said Metra

Executive Director/CEO Don Orseno.

The changes that Metra has made are outlined below.

Cold-air blowers

Keeping yards clear of snow and ice is critical to maintaining timely service during winter months. Blocked switches and tracks in yards can restrict train movement, resulting in congestion that can prevent trains from reaching their originating stations in a timely manner. Metra hot-air jet blowers help with this task, but in bitter cold, the snow and ice melted by those blowers can sometimes refreeze and create new problems. Metra now has three new cold-air blowers, which can forcefully clear ice and snow without melting it with a 525-mph blast of air. They can travel over roads or rails and
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Metra to raise fares on Feb. 1

2015 budget also restores 10-ride discount and grace period on monthly passes

Metra's Board of Directors has approved a \$753.1 million operating budget and \$328.9 million capital program for 2015 that includes an average fare increase of 10.8 percent across all fare types to help fund a modernization plan as well as the increasing costs associated with operating commuter rail service.

The decision to raise fares in 2015 was made after Metra took multiple steps to contain costs. In recent years, Metra identified \$5.9 million in efficiencies that are still positively impacting Metra's current budget and will continue to reduce costs in 2015. For example, a renegotiated agreement with the South Shore Line reduced Metra costs by \$2.3 million in 2015. Metra has also implemented further efficiencies that will reduce its operating costs for 2015 by \$7.8 million, including \$3.3 million in savings in maintenance costs, \$3.8 million in employee health care cost savings and \$700,000 in security cost reductions.

"We are continuously looking for ways to run this agency

as effectively and efficiently as possible," said Metra Board Chairman Martin J. Oberman. "But the simple fact is that cost containment can only go so far. Through this budget, Metra is demonstrating that it is spending the dollars necessary to maintain service and taking the steps necessary to invest in its future."

Nevertheless, the Board directed staff to prepare a detailed report by January 2015 outlining whether additional costs can be cut without reducing or eliminating service.

The price of full-fare, one-way tickets will increase between 10.8 and 18.2 percent, depending on the zone. Full-fare 10-ride tickets will change from a reduction of 0.3 percent to an increase of 6.4 percent. Full-fare monthly passes will increase between 10.9 percent and 18.6 percent. The price of reduced-fare, one-way tickets will increase between 11.1 and 22.3 percent, depending on the zone. Reduced-fare 10-ride tickets will increase between 0 and 10 percent. Reduced-fare monthly passes will increase between 11.1 percent and 22.2 percent.

A portion of the fare increase will be used to cover debt service on a bond issue
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On the Bi-Level

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Winter

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have articulated arms to change the direction of the air, making them more versatile than the rail-based hot-air jet blowers, which can only blow in one direction. The cold-air blowers cost \$1.25 million total.

Yard switch heaters

Metra has switch heaters on all mainline switches, and has now added heaters to the 20 most critical switches at its Western Ave. Coach Yard. Heaters prevent falling snow from clogging the switches, and installing them at Western Ave. will also help prevent bottlenecks due to switch problems that can delay trains. The cost was about \$1 million.

Investing in switches is a routine part of Metra's capital program every year, and 2014 was no different. However, new switches and old switches are equally vulnerable to the problem that plagued Metra last winter: Snow and ice accumulates on the underside of locomotives and train cars, and then falls into a switch as the train rumbles over it. The snow and ice can then prevent the switch from working properly. Heaters help, but usually the switch must be cleared manually, which can take time and lead to delays. Metra routinely assigns maintainers to key switching locations during winter storms to keep the switches clear.

"Customize Your Commute"

Metra riders who are signed up to receive email alerts can now tell Metra precisely when they want to receive them. The change was adopted last spring after many riders suggested that the alerts would be more useful if Metra gave customers the option of choosing to receive them only during certain time periods – for instance, during their regular morning and evening commutes. Riders can sign up to receive alerts by going to the Metra

website and clicking on the "My Metra" tab in the upper right corner.

Train tracker upgrades

Metra has made a variety of changes to its "Rail-time Tracker" tool on its website so that it gives riders the most complete, up-to-date information about schedule adjustments as well as better real-time information about the status of trains.

The train tracker has added a third column that lists the estimated arrival time for the trains at a rider's selected destination station. And it lists information for the next six trains, instead of three, with an option to view even more.

In addition, the tracker now always includes the unique schedule for each day, if there is one. For example, if extra trains have been added that day due to a special event, those trains will now appear in the tracker. Before, those extra trains would have been highlighted elsewhere on our website but would not be displayed by the tracker.

And we can also change the tracker to reflect last-minute schedule adjustments due to weather, accidents, mechanical problems or other issues.

Most of the changes that affect the train tracker will also apply to our online Schedule Finder tool, which allows a rider to generate a schedule between two stops on a line for a specific day.

Alternative schedules

Metra has prepared alternative schedules that it may implement when extreme weather conditions or serious service disruptions do not allow for operation of regularly scheduled service. The schedules include on average about 75 percent of the regular schedule, which will give Metra more flexibility to handle the impact of severe weather or other disruptions and help riders make their commuting plans. Those schedules are already posted at www.metrarail.com/altschedules

so riders can see how the changes would affect their commutes.

If Metra decides to implement the alternative schedules, it will provide advance notice to riders via its website, email alerts and Chicago area news media. The alternative schedules would also be uploaded into the train tracker and schedule finder tool for the days that they are in effect.

GPS Center changes

Several changes have been made in Metra's GPS Center, which is responsible for sending alerts and making announcements about service issues. In addition to making announcements on train station platforms, the GPS team now makes live announcements directly to affected trains. We have taken steps to ensure that GPS personnel have more time to concentrate on notifications to riders. For instance, a new automated message system has reduced the phone calls that GPS personnel must make to alert traffic reporters and internal Metra staff about issues; it also helps get messages out quicker. And in early 2015, we will be automating some of the process for sending email alerts so they can be sent more quickly. In addition, on busy days, staff will be added to help with timely communications.

Rolling Stock

Metra has been working on the door systems of its oldest cars to address issues that resulted in frozen doors last year. Metra has also completed its annual winterization on its entire fleet, during which numerous repairs were made where needed.

Metra also is working to improve the locomotives and cars in its fleet. It recently announced a \$2.4 billion plan to buy 52 new locomotives and 367 new cars and renovate 85 locomotives and 455 cars. Those new cars will take some time to order and be built. In the meantime, Metra has bought some used engines and cars that should be in service during this winter.

SOUND OFF



Hairy seats

The picture says it all. Please don't fling your hair into the seat behind you. Really? Could I be arrested if I snipped three inches?

Sincerely
Scissors in Hand

You probably could be, but perhaps you could plead self-defense.

Tin foil hats

I often grab a quick breakfast at home to nibble on the train to save time on my long ride into the city. Recently, I was enjoying my peanut butter sandwich and the person sitting next to me kept coughing loudly. Since we have Quiet Cars, can't we have Sick Cars or No Coughing Cars? It was really disruptive and ruined my morning. Another rider then took the tin foil from my sandwich and covered his head with it. It was a weird morning.

Rich

No sick people in the Quiet Car, got it.

No workaholics

You can call me anal if you like – I've been called worse – but laptops on the Quiet Car have to go. Nothing is worse than settling in your seat to nap, read,

whatever, and have Mr. or Mrs. 90 Words Per Minute sitting behind you hammering away at their laptop. It's no different than playing a video game with the sound on and all those bells and whistles going off left and right. If these workaholics have nothing better to do than slave away at a computer screen all day and night, that's their choice, their right. Just don't interrupt my right to sit on the Quiet Car quietly with your thunderous paws!

20 WPM

And no noisy typing either, got it.

And another thing...

I must agree with a letter in the last issue of "Sound Off." Honest to God, I am not a whiney person and don't have a weak stomach usually. But why must we smell the pork rinds and beer and McDonald's and other crap people eat, drink and belch up on the train? It is really disgusting. Please make the Quiet Cars food and alcohol-free and I'll never complain again!

Mary

No food. Check. No booze. Check. Is there anyone left in the Quiet Car now?

Sneaking a freebie

Dear Sneaky Guy: We, your fellow passengers are on to you. We see you getting on at our stops and sitting by us each day, and hunching behind your newspaper or acting oblivious or (good ploy) pretending to be asleep when the conductor comes by to collect tickets. And not producing your ticket.

We wanted you to know that we see you for what you are, a cheater at heart trying to get away with something. It must be



Rail history

With the changing position of the morning sun, I recently noticed the embossed "USS ILLINOIS 1952." There were several such rails. Could they really have been manufactured by US Steel Illinois (South Works) in 1952?

Jim

What an interesting question this turned out to be. The photo you sent us is actually a picture of the rail branding, which gives a lot of information about each section of rail:

- *The first three digits of the brand tells us the weight per yard of the section – 132 pounds.*
- *The next two letters indicate the engineering association that established the design specifications for that section – "RE," the most common section in the North America, stands for the American Railway Engineering Association or the American Railway Engineering and Maintenance-of-Way Association. (The "25" after the 132 at the beginning identifies the shape of the RE section.)*
- *Next comes a two-letter code that indicates the process used for hydrogen elimination in the manufacturing of the rail. "CC" stands for control-cooled. (Gases, especially hydrogen, must be eliminated because they can cause cracks, voids and other problems after steel has solidified.)*
- *Next comes the answer to your question: Yes, this section really was made by U.S. Steel in Illinois in 1952.*
- *The eight marks following 1952 indicate this section was made in the eighth month, or August.*

There is even more information stamped on the other side of the rail about the manufacturing process and the batch of steel the section came from.

difficult going through life like that, but at least be ashamed of your behavior, if only for a moment. I encourage other passengers to make note of these guys. Let your conductor know about it. You will think, am I wrong? Is this guy really doing it? But trust your instincts. The conductors

need our help, and are grateful when the sneaks are forced to do the right thing.

Nick

Thanks. We do want to know when people are evading fares. Tell your conductor or go to www.metrrail.com to report it.

Help the needy with toys, coats and food

Metra riders who want to donate a toy or coats to needy Chicagoans will be able to do so this month when Metra hosts a toy drive and then a coat drive at its downtown stations. They can also donate to the Greater Chicago Food Depository food drive.



Toys for Tots Dec. 11

Metra, the U.S. Marines and PODS of Chicago will be spreading holiday cheer from 6 a.m. to 1 p.m. on Thursday, Dec. 11, when they will hold a Toys for Tots toy drive at all downtown Metra stations.

For the third straight year, Metra is hoping to transform its trains into Santa's sleds, delivering toys from riders to Millennium, Van Buren, LaSalle Street, Union Station and the Ogilvie Transportation Center, where Marines and Metra workers will be collecting them in containers donated by PODS of Chicago.

Metra riders are asked to consider donating new, unwrapped toys to the campaign, an annual event orchestrated by the U.S. Marine Corps Reserve Toys for Tots Foundation. The Toys for Tots program relies on the generosity of the public, and it is that generosity that brings the idea of Santa Claus to the homes of less fortunate children. Last year, Metra riders donated more than 5,000 toys.

"We are extremely excited to be working with the U.S. Marines and PODS of Chicago on this very important and heart-warming initiative," said Metra Executive Director/CEO Don Orseno.

The primary goal of Toys for Tots is to deliver, through a shiny new toy at Christmas, a message of hope to needy youngsters that will motivate them to grow into responsible, productive, patriotic citizens and community leaders. The foundation will distribute the gifts collected at this drive to needy children in the Chicago area.

Coat Drive Dec. 15, 16 and 17

Metra will help with the annual NBC5/Telemundo/Salvation

Army coat drive by placing collection boxes at the same five downtown stations (Millennium, Van Buren, LaSalle Street, Union Station and the Ogilvie Transportation Center) all day on Monday Dec. 15; Tuesday, Dec. 16; and Wednesday, Dec. 17. Riders are asked to consider donating a new or gently worn coat.



Greater Chicago Food Depository Drive

Please also consider donating to the Greater Chicago Food Depository food drive. Collection bins have been placed in 225 public locations, including numerous buildings downtown. To find a location, visit the group's website at www.myfooddrive.org. Bins are located at Metra's headquarters at 547 W. Jackson and the South Water entrance to Millennium Station.

Budget

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of \$100 million, which would be the first in Metra history, or similar financing. The financing, combined with additional financing proposed for future years, will be used to help fund a \$2.4 billion modernization plan. The rest of the fare increase will be used primarily to cover a growth in expenses, outlined below.

Metra's budget projects expenses to grow by \$51.5 million in 2015. That includes \$18.5 million for labor and fringe benefits, \$6 million in added maintenance expenses due to the age of its equipment, \$9.6 million in other expense growth, \$8.4 million for the financing proposal and \$3 million for the added costs to our

operating budget for the federally mandated Positive Train Control system. It also includes a \$6 million increase in the amount of farebox revenue that Metra is setting aside for capital needs.

The 2015 budget includes an increase in funding from external sources of \$18 million. This includes a \$12.3 million increase regional transportation sales tax receipts, \$6 million from the RTA and a \$700,000 increase in the state reduced fare subsidy, minus \$1 million in security grant funding. The deficit is further reduced by \$6.2 million from an accounting change, a projected increase in non-fare revenue and grants from the RTA's Innovation, Coordination and Enhancement program.

That leaves a \$27.3 million gap between costs and projec-

tions for available funding. This shortfall will be funded through the fare increase.

As part of the 2015 budget proposal, Metra will restore a discount on 10-ride tickets that was eliminated in 2013. The 10-ride ticket will now be priced at the cost of nine one-way fares, instead of the current 10 one-way fares. All the changes, including the fare increase, will begin Feb. 1, 2015.

Other fare policy changes include:

- The grace period on monthly tickets will be restored,

so that they will be valid on the first business day of the following month until noon.

- One-way tickets will be good for 90 days, instead of the current 14.

- The extra charge for buying a ticket onboard the train will increase to \$5 from \$3 (The surcharge is not applied if no ticket agent is available at the boarding station.)

- Weekend passes will increase to \$8 from \$7.

- A general no refund policy will be adopted, but exceptions could be outlined in the future.

Contact Metra

If you have a complaint, compliment, service issue or any other issue, we want to hear from you. You can call a Passenger Service Representative at (312) 322-6777 (8 a.m. to 5 p.m. weekdays) or send email to metrarail_feedback@metrarr.com.