

Metra ON THE BI-LEVEL

Commuter Newsletter, February 2014



Oberman, Orseno to lead Metra



Martin Oberman

The Metra Board of Directors has selected Martin J. Oberman from among its own ranks to serve as Metra's newest chairman and officially removed the interim tag in front of Executive Director/CEO

Don Orseno's title. Both Orseno and Oberman have acknowledged that this unusually cold and snowy winter has been difficult on Metra and its passengers, and they have pledged to do all they can to improve operations and especially communications to riders.

Oberman, 68, a former Chicago alderman with a long career as a leader of the reform effort in politics, was unanimously

elected as next chairman of the board on Feb. 11. A respected public figure in Chicago for nearly four decades, he is well-positioned to be an effective voice for Metra, particularly in demonstrating that the agency has



Don Orseno

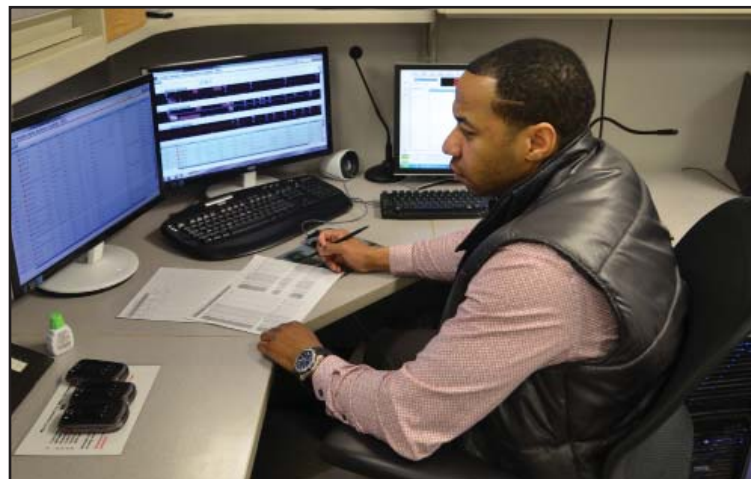
turned a corner and is committed to moving forward. Such skills will be needed, particularly in Springfield and Washington, at a time when Metra urgently needs billions of dollars to address its capital needs.

Oberman, who was appointed to the board by Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel last September, stressed that Metra must move beyond regional divisions
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GPS Center is at the heart of Metra

The Metra GPS Center occupies a wing of our headquarters building, kitty-corner from Union Station. It's on a high floor but the view's not great – unless you count the parking garage across the street. From this room, however, we can see every train on the Metra system across the six-county Chicago area.

We're seeing them, of course, through the wonders of GPS technology. There in the center, workers monitor the trains on computer screens that not only show a train's exact real-time location but also whether it is keeping to its posted schedule – and if not, how many minutes it's behind. They can view the trains as a list, or see them superimposed over a route map, with each train represented as a triangle pointing in their direction of travel. To help monitor the train's status, the triangle



Jason H. Bullock, a technical communications specialist in the Metra GPS Center, monitors trains on the Rock Island and SouthWest Service lines.

is green if the train is on time, yellow if it is experiencing minor delays and red if the delay is more than 10 minutes.

In rush hour there are generally seven front-line workers on duty, and between them they

cover all 11 of Metra's lines. Five of them sit in a row of cubicles indistinguishable from any other office, except they each have three or four computer monitors on their desks. The other two sit in a separate area and only

cover the Metra Electric Line, because it is a busy line with two branches and because those workers also monitor a phone and video system unique to that line. If things get busy on one line, another worker or supervisor can step in to help.

When a train is operating behind schedule, the train's conductor and the GPS center worker will communicate by phone to determine the reason. As soon as the trains fall six minutes or more behind, the GPS worker will start making announcements onboard the delayed train and on the platforms where passengers are waiting.

He or she can do this in two ways. Usually they type a message, which is then turned into an automated audio announcement and posted on the Visual Voice of Metra – the scrolling
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On the Bi-Level

Published by Metra's Media Relations Department. Send letters, questions or feedback to On the Bi-Level, Metra, 547 W. Jackson, Chicago IL, 60661-5717. Or e-mail onthebilevel@metrarr.com.

We can't guarantee all letters will be printed or answered. Please keep letters to less than 200 words and include your first name, hometown and what line you ride. (Names are not required but strongly encouraged.) We reserve the right to edit letter for length and grammar.

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New leaders at Metra

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and competition and act in the best interests of the system as a whole.

"A well-functioning Metra is essential to the economic well-being of the entire six-county region," Oberman said.

"Chicago cannot flourish unless there is ample commuter transportation for suburban dwellers who work in the city and come into the city for culture and entertainment. By the same token, suburban areas cannot thrive unless Metra provides first-rate commuter service – including reverse-commute service – to the entire region."

He said he was intent on establishing Metra as a well-run railroad corporation, operated with the highest degree of professionalism, honesty and transparency and insulated from improper political interference. Noting that there are no simple answers to the complex challenges facing Metra, he said his job will be to encourage all viewpoints and to

build as broad a consensus as possible.

"The days of the chairman acting as a power center are over," he said. "I am just one of 11 votes, and all of us will have an equal voice in Metra's affairs."

Oberman most notably served as an alderman from Chicago's 43rd Ward from 1975 to 1987, where he was known for his independence and for pushing reform agenda. He has been a lawyer in private practice since 1989.

Orseno, 59, has served as the interim leader of Metra since last August. Board members said he was the clear favorite among three other candidates who were interviewed.

"It is a difficult balance to find an individual who has an understanding of railroad operations, customer service delivery, and local and national advocacy, but we have found that individual in Don Orseno," said Vice Chairman Jack Partelow.

"Metra is a complex organization," Oberman said. "Don Orseno has the qualifications we need for this job. He has the relationships with the staff and unions to move this agency forward. We did look at good candidates, but none came up to the standards and qualifications that we found in Don."

"I want our riders to know that nothing will be more important to me – and to Metra – than providing safe, dependable and comfortable trains and the best possible customer service," Orseno said.

Tackling Metra's huge capital funding needs and restoring the public trust in Metra are among Orseno's other priorities, he said.

Orseno has worked for the railroad industry for 40 years. A native of the Chicago area, he began his career as a Rock Island Railroad trainman. Since joining Metra in 1984, he has risen through the ranks based upon his stellar performance and no-nonsense work ethic.

February is Black History Month

"Success is to be measured not so much by the position that one has reached in life as by the obstacles which he has overcome while trying to succeed."

– Booker T. Washington, educator, author, orator

"When you are kind to someone, you hope they'll remember and be kind to someone else and it will become like wildfire."

– Whoopi Goldberg, comedian, actress

SOUND OFF

You're not home

I cannot believe the habits of some people on the train. Every weekday I take the Metra Electric. There is a woman who is always using her commuting time as her personal grooming time. She sits down, pulls out a large mirror, removes curlers from her hair, fixes her hair (using hair spray, never considering the passengers around her), applies her makeup and is usually finished by the time we arrive downtown. I have also seen other people applying makeup, polishing nails, clipping their nails and picking their teeth. These behaviors are totally disgusting! I realize Metra can do nothing about these bad manners, but perhaps if you print this letter, they will get a very strong hint.

George

That's what we're here for.

And neither are you

Please realize that your bed is at home. Taking two or three seats and taking off your shoes may be comfortable for you but not for others. What's next, getting into PJs and spooning?

Mike

Let's not give anyone any ideas, OK?

Another rule

You posted a set of suggested rules for riders...and I'd suggest another one: "Don't wander back & forth in the platform doorway with a big backpack when a train is about to close the doors... you're likely to get flattened."

I ALMOST slammed one oblivious occupant of space who was standing in the platform doorway as I ran for the train. He turned and wandered right, so I aimed behind him as I ran... and then he spun back...and



turned the other way... "The pedestrian didn't know which way to jump so I hit him" is the old insurance claim joke. Trying to dodge this random motion roadblock back & forth, I missed the train.

Thanks for bringing back the "Sound Off" section!

Rich

We'll add that one to the ever-growing list.

A different view

In response to Kathy's submission in the January issue... When one places their bag on the seat next to them, it is NOT seat-hogging. On the other hand, refusing to move said bag when asked certainly is rude.

People will do this from time to time, particularly during the winter months when the floors are covered in salt, water and slush, all of which can easily damage someone's bag. Why would I place my bag on a filthy wet salty floor unless I had to?

If you want to sit next to me, you don't need to punch me in the nose (Really? Is that how you handle disagreements?)... Just say something and it's a non-issue. I'm usually looking out for you anyway.

Too often, people simply

choose not to communicate with one another in the most basic and decent ways. Most people are not mind readers, but they are decent people. Just ask. That's all you have to do.

Sean

What you say is certainly reasonable. But most people do not like confrontation, and we suspect many riders may respond to your letter by asking: Why should I be responsible for getting you to stop occupying more than one seat, so I can sit down?

Seat-savers are as bad

Seat hogs aren't the only rude, selfish, inconsiderate passengers; seat savers are equally, if not more, ill-mannered, discourteous and ignorant as well. I can't tell you how many times I have heard: I'm waiting for a friend; I'm meeting someone; I'm saving this for a friend; This seat is for someone else; I'm expecting someone; and I'm saving this for my husband. This isn't high school or grammar school. Seats are available on a first-come, first served basis. Please try to behave like courteous adults.

Julie

That's what we've been saying all along.

Time for some nice

I know a lot of people write you to complain but today I got off the train and every car in the parking lot was iced over...I walked to my car expecting to have to scrape off my windows and they were clear. Some nice commuter made my night after a very long day! I do not know who my good samaritan is but I want to thank them...They ride the Rock Island line and it is the New Lenox train station!

Renee

And then some more

Recently I have had the pleasure to experience just how thoughtful my fellow Metra riders are. Both events originated on the Milwaukee West Line in Roselle but I'm sure these aren't isolated incidents. First, I'd dropped my wallet which holds several important items: my work ID, a monthly Metra pass, and my wife's photo. I didn't realize I dropped this until I boarded my inbound train. However, even before I arrived in the Loop, the stationmaster in Roselle had called my home letting my wife know that some kind-hearted person had turned in my wallet, completely intact. Then just a few weeks ago, again on my ride into the Loop I realized I was missing a glove, no small matter given this recent weather. But once again a fellow commuter found it and gave it to the Roselle's stationmaster. Sure enough the next morning I arrived early and was elated to find my glove. Regardless of our pesky nail-clipping and selfish seat-hogging habits, I'd like to suggest that we commute with a fine bunch of people.

David

We couldn't agree any more. We have great riders.

GPS Center is at the heart of Metra

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signs in most stations and on many ADA-accessible cars. But they can also speak directly into a microphone at their desks and make a live announcement. In either case, they check boxes on a computer screen to select the stations where the announcements will be heard. It could be the whole line or just the scheduled stops that the delayed train hasn't reached yet. The announcement can also be sent to the train.

If the delayed train falls 15 minutes behind schedule, then the shift supervisors step in. They type an alert that warns riders the train is delayed, giving the length of the delay and the reason. They indicate the train number, but add the train's scheduled departure from or arrival at the downtown terminus, since we know many riders do not know train numbers. With a few quick clicks, the alert is emailed to riders who have signed up for them, sent out on Twitter and posted on the Metra website, www.metrarail.com.

If we know about something that is going to delay more than one train – such as a grade crossing incident or a switch failure at a critical location – we will issue a “blanket” alert as soon as we know about it. We call it that because it covers the whole line, warning that all trains may be delayed. Our intent is to let you know about the potential disruption, even if we do not specifically know how it will affect individual trains.

We can try to estimate the length of the delay, but usually we cannot give you an exact time. That's especially true with grade crossing incidents, when local investigating authorities take over the scene and dictate when train traffic can resume. Our police work with authorities at the scene to speed the process,

but the decision is ultimately theirs.

We strive to make sure our alerts are timely and as accurate as possible. Unfortunately, an alert that is accurate the moment it's sent can quickly become outdated as the situation changes. For instance, we may send an alert about a train that is 15 minutes late, but at that moment the train may encounter a switch that was clogged by ice and snow that fell from a train ahead of it. That will add to the delay and require us to send an updated alert.

Metra is aware that riders have been dissatisfied with our communications, especially this winter, and we are sincerely sorry. We have initiated a top-to-bottom review of all our policies and procedures to identify issues and ways to improve.

While not directly managed by our GPS Center, the Metra Real-Time Train Tracker also plays a role in communication with riders. It tells riders whether their trains are on time or how late they are operating. The tracker is a great tool but we are working to improve it so it provides more, and more useful, information.

Sometime this summer, we will be enhancing our train tracking system by using GTFS real time data, the new industry standard for sharing GPS information with a variety of users. The RTA has provided funding to push GPS information from our trains to our website and to the RTA trip planner. This will allow for real-time delay information and train tracking.

In addition, GTFS real time will allow for on-the-fly trip updates and service alerts. We believe these enhancements will bolster our customer communication and provide our riders with additional trip-planning tools.

Reasons for delays

Some reasons for delays – mechanical problems, medical emergencies, grade crossing incidents – are obvious, but others may require some explanation. What do we mean when we say a delay is due to...

Passenger loading?

This refers to anytime it takes longer than usual for loading of passengers. It could be an unusual number of passengers, a lot of passengers with luggage, strollers or bicycles, or the need to deploy the ADA lift an unusual number of times. It could be that passengers in winter are waiting in their cars or in the depots until the last possible moment, rather than waiting on the platforms as they usually do.

Late arrival of equipment?

Metra operates 703 trains a day, but that doesn't mean we have 703 separate sets of equipment. Trains will typically run downtown as one trip (inbound trains are even-numbered) and then “flip” to go outbound (as an odd number), and vice versa. If the inbound train is late for any reason, the equipment will not be in place for the start of the outbound trip, so we say the outbound train was delayed due to late arrival of equipment. The equipment could also be delayed coming out of the yards.

Waiting on other trains?

This could mean that a train had to wait for another train to clear a single-track section, or it could simply mean there is congestion on the tracks ahead.

Freight train interference?

The level of freight traffic varies by line but most of them can see freight delays. About 500-600 freight trains operate through Chicago each day and maybe 65 percent of those trains touch us in some way, either by crossing tracks used by Metra trains or sharing tracks used by Metra trains. No other commuter railroad in the U.S. or Canada has such a complex interface with freight railroads. For a three-hour period twice each weekday, the general freight system in Chicago significantly curtails its operations in order to allow Metra to protect its peak period schedules, but some do attempt to move some of their traffic in the small windows between our trains. Even with these arrangements, we still must do a great deal of planning and coordination to keep things running smoothly at all times.

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.