

GAO

Briefing Report to the Honorable
Bobby L. Rush, House of
Representatives

August 1993

URBAN TRANSPORTATION

Issues Related to the South Corridor Study



Resources, Community, and
Economic Development Division

B-254007

August 6, 1993

The Honorable Bobby L. Rush
House of Representatives

Dear Mr. Rush:

This briefing report responds to your request that we review efforts by the Regional Transportation Authority (RTA) in Chicago to assess public transportation services in an area known as the South Corridor. You expressed concern that the alternatives currently under consideration could have an adverse economic impact on businesses and residents in the South Corridor. Specifically, you asked us to analyze RTA's South Corridor Transit Study and report on (1) the process the study participants used to develop a series of alternatives for "rationalizing"¹ transit service in the study area, (2) the degree to which the public was involved in the decision-making process, and (3) the projected time frames for implementing alternatives that would expand or eliminate existing service in the study area.

On June 4, 1993, we briefed you on the results of our review. You asked that we convey the substance of the briefing to you in written form. This report serves to formalize the information presented in that briefing.

In summary, we found that

- RTA used a multiphase process to develop planning alternatives for rationalizing transit service in the South Corridor,
- public participation in RTA's process was limited, and
- changes to transit service in the South Corridor are not imminent.

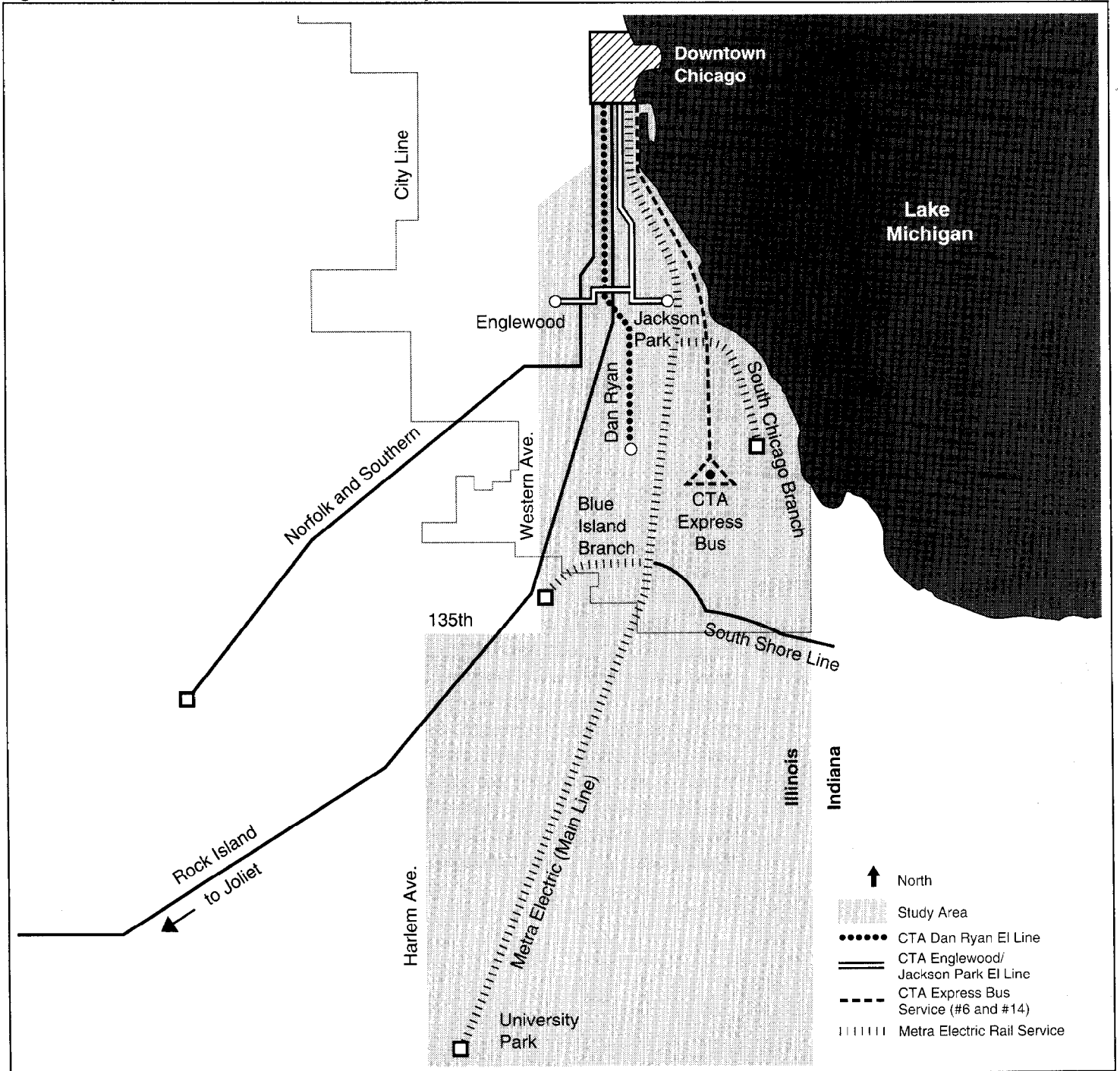
Background

Three transit agencies currently serve the South Corridor: Metropolitan Rail (Metra), a suburban commuter rail line; the Chicago Transit Authority (CTA), which provides city bus and rapid transit service; and Pace, a suburban bus service. These transit agencies are responsible for operations, service, and fare decisions on each of their respective systems. RTA is responsible for funding, budget oversight, coordination, and long-range planning for the transit agencies. The Federal Transit Administration (FTA) provided a planning grant to fund part of RTA's South

¹According to an RTA official, the process of "rationalizing" transit service could expand, eliminate, reroute, or maintain existing service.

Corridor Transit Study. Several alternatives under consideration in this study would reduce or eliminate service on Metra's Electric Main Line and Blue Island and South Chicago branches, CTA's Englewood/Jackson Park elevated line, and CTA's express bus service. These lines currently provide transit service to the downtown business district for commuters living in Chicago's South Side and adjacent suburban communities (see fig. 1). Pace operations would not be affected by any of the alternatives under consideration.

Figure 1: Map of the South Corridor Transit Study Area



Source: GAO adaptation of RTA map.

RTA Used a Multiphase Process to Develop Planning Alternatives

The process for rationalizing transit service in the South Corridor began in 1989. At that time, RTA initiated a series of studies that documented the number of riders and the cost of the existing transit service in the South Corridor. In the summer of 1991, a Technical Committee, comprising representatives of the transit agencies and other transportation officials, used this preliminary information to develop 13 planning alternatives for changing the existing South Corridor transit service. RTA subsequently hired a consulting firm to assess the 13 planning alternatives using five criteria: engineering feasibility, operating feasibility, impacts on the community, impacts on ridership, and financial requirements. In July 1992, the consultant recommended that six of the alternatives be eliminated from further consideration. The remaining seven alternatives propose to expand the existing service by developing a new light rail line, reduce the existing service by closing the Englewood/Jackson Park elevated line, and change service by rerouting the existing express bus service. Section 1 contains a detailed description of the decision-making process used in the study and the seven planning alternatives currently being reviewed.

Public Participation in RTA's Process Was Limited

According to RTA officials, public participation in the planning process was limited, since no federal, state, or local regulations require community participation for this type of long-range planning study. The transit agencies are not expected to implement any changes until after they have reviewed the consultant's final assessment of the seven remaining alternatives. If a transit agency decides to begin to implement any of the study's final recommendations, FTA will then require the agency to conduct public hearings on the proposed changes. Nonetheless, South Corridor citizens and community leaders are dissatisfied with the level of public participation that RTA sought during the planning process. Community members stated that early public involvement in the planning process was needed, since many of the alternatives that the transit agencies are now considering could adversely affect South Corridor residents who depend on public transportation. Section 2 contains a detailed description of the South Corridor Transit Study's public participation program.

Changes to Transit Service Are Not Imminent

Actual changes to transit service in the South Corridor are not imminent. RTA's final report on the South Corridor Transit Study will be released in late August 1993. The transit agencies have not yet set any milestones for implementing changes in service. The report will include the consultant's recommendations of short- and long-range transit planning alternatives. Before any alternative is implemented, the transit agency must receive the approval of its governing board to alter transit operations. The transit agencies must also identify the funding sources for any service changes. In addition, FTA will require the affected transit agency to complete a series of requirements, including public hearings, before the agency alters (expands or eliminates) any existing transit service. Section 3 contains a detailed explanation of the statutory and regulatory requirements for implementing any of the planning alternatives.

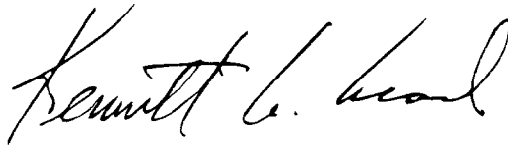
In conducting our review, we analyzed the South Corridor Transit Study documents, including the Phase I Report and Appendixes, the Focus Group Report, and the Phase II Technical Memorandum: Fatal Flaw Screening Analysis. We also interviewed members of the Technical Committee, including representatives of RTA, CTA, Metra, the city of Chicago's Department of Transportation, and FTA's Region V. In addition, we interviewed other RTA and FTA officials who were not serving on the Technical Committee but who were involved in the South Corridor Transit Study. Finally, we interviewed community group leaders from the Neighborhood Capital Budget Group and the South Corridor Transit Coalition. We performed our work between March and August 1993.

We met with RTA officials, including the General Counsel and Assistant Executive Director, to discuss our findings. We also met with FTA officials in the region. FTA officials stated that our report was factually correct and provided no additional comments. RTA officials gave us additional information that clarified the chronology of events surrounding the South Corridor Transit Study and the requirements for enacting any changes to the existing transit service. We incorporated their comments into this briefing report where appropriate.

We will send copies of this briefing report to the Administrator, Federal Transit Administration; the Executive Director, Regional Transportation Authority; the President, Chicago Transit Authority; the Executive Director, Metra; and the Executive Director, Pace. We will make copies available to others on request.

Please contact Kenneth M. Mead on (202) 512-2834 or John H. Luke on (312) 220-7767 if you or your staff have any questions. Major contributors to this briefing report are listed in appendix II.

Sincerely yours,



Kenneth M. Mead
Director, Transportation Issues



John H. Luke
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Contents

Letter		1
Section 1		10
The Study's Planning Process	Background	10
	Phase I	11
	Phase II	11
	Seven Alternatives	12
Section 2		14
The Study's Public Participation Program	Opportunities for Public Participation	14
	Adequacy of Opportunities for Public Participation	15
Section 3		16
Implementing the Study's Recommendations		
Appendix I		18
Chronology of South Corridor Transit Study		
Appendix II		20
Major Contributors to This Report		
Figure	Figure 1: Map of the South Corridor Transit Study Area	3

Abbreviations

CATS	Chicago Area Transportation Study
CTA	Chicago Transit Authority
FTA	Federal Transit Administration
Metra	Metropolitan Rail
RTA	Regional Transportation Authority

The Study's Planning Process

RTA initiated the South Corridor Transit Study to obtain a comprehensive analysis of transit service in the study area. The phased study began with the collection of data on riders, costs, and community characteristics, such as transit dependency. Thirteen planning alternatives were developed during the first phase. In the second phase, the 13 alternatives were reduced to 7. After further assessing the remaining alternatives, the consultant will recommend short- and long-term changes in transit service for the South Corridor.

Background

In 1987, Metra purchased the Illinois Central Gulf Railroad's commuter assets, which included what is now the Metra Electric Main Line, the South Chicago Branch, and the Blue Island Branch. RTA's board of directors approved Metra's purchase with the stipulation that Metra conduct a productivity study of the commuter rail services it had purchased. RTA subsequently took over leadership of the study after deciding that Metra's service could not be studied in isolation and that all transit services in the South Corridor should be examined.

RTA assembled a Technical Committee and a Steering Committee to direct the study. The Technical Committee includes representatives of RTA, CTA, Metra, Pace, the city of Chicago's Department of Transportation and Department of Planning and Development, FTA's Region V, the Chicago Area Transportation Study (or CATS, the metropolitan planning organization for the Chicago region), and the South Suburban Mayors and Managers Association. The Steering Committee includes, among others, the executive directors of RTA and the service boards.

The South Corridor Transit Study began in January 1989. The final report will be available in late August 1993. Phase I of the study, completed in September 1991, cost \$350,000 and was funded through RTA's budget. Phase II, not yet completed, is projected to cost \$450,000; 80 percent (\$360,000) is being funded through a Section 8 planning grant from FTA and the balance is being funded through RTA's budget.

The study area is bounded on the north by Roosevelt Road, on the south by the southern border of Crete and Monee townships, on the east by Lake Michigan and the Illinois/Indiana border, and on the west by Western Avenue and Harlem Avenue. The study reviews the four major transit lines in the area that carry commuters downtown. Metra provides commuter rail service on its Electric Main Line and Blue Island and South Chicago branches—a rail system that transports commuters from the South Side

and suburban areas to downtown Chicago. CTA provides rapid transit on two elevated train lines—the Dan Ryan Line and the Englewood/Jackson Park Line. These lines serve commuters living south of downtown Chicago and within the city's boundaries. CTA also provides express bus service from the southern part of the city to the downtown area on its #6 and #14 South Lakefront buses (see fig. 1).

Phase I

The South Corridor Transit Study Phase I Report—prepared by Multisystems, Inc., and released in September 1991—provided demographic data and characterized the existing and future transit services and markets in the South Corridor. According to the report, the Englewood/Jackson Park Line carries 58,000 weekday riders and operates at a cost per passenger of \$3.25. In contrast, the Dan Ryan Line carries 115,000 weekday riders and operates at a cost per passenger of \$1.49. Systemwide, CTA's rapid rail transit operates at an average cost per passenger of \$1.76. CTA's express bus service in the study area operates at the same cost as the average systemwide express bus—\$1.73 per passenger—and carries 29,000 weekday riders. The report notes that, overall, the Dan Ryan Line and the express buses provide the most cost-effective transit service in the study area. However, in assessing social impacts, the report states that, of the four transit lines studied, the Englewood/Jackson Park Line and the express buses carry the largest shares of low-income and autoless riders.

Phase II

Using the information presented in the Phase I report and their own judgment, the study's Technical Committee members and the Phase II consultant—STV/Seelye, Stevenson, Value, and Knecht—brainstormed 13 transit planning alternatives. This effort took place over the course of 2 months, during which each of the organizations represented on the Technical Committee independently devised a list of alternatives. They then met four times and after evaluating, combining, and eliminating alternatives, reached consensus on 13 transit planning alternatives to pursue further in Phase II.

The Technical and Steering committees and the Phase II consultant then assessed the technical feasibility of the 13 alternatives. In July 1992, the consultant released an interim report that evaluated the 13 alternatives against five criteria: engineering feasibility, operating feasibility, impacts on the community, impacts on ridership, and financial requirements. The goal of the analysis was to determine whether any of the 13 alternatives

would be infeasible when measured against the five criteria. The study's Technical and Steering committees approved the results of this analysis and reduced the number of alternatives for further study from 13 to 7. The consultant is currently projecting numbers of riders and developing operating plans for the remaining alternatives.

Seven Alternatives

The Technical and Steering committees and the consultant developed a null alternative, three short-term alternatives, and three long-term alternatives to the existing transit service.

Null Alternative

The null alternative proposes to maintain the existing South Corridor Transit System, which comprises the four major transit lines described above. This alternative assumes that CTA and Metra will complete all service and capital improvements planned through the year 2010. It also assumes that CTA's Howard/Dan Ryan and Lake/Englewood/Jackson Park realignments will be complete and that the southwest rapid transit line to Midway Airport will be operational. Finally, it assumes that the Central Area Circulator will be in operation and that the third regional airport will be located at the Lake Calumet site.

Short-Term Alternatives

The three short-term alternatives propose the following:

- Fare integration would coordinate the fare structures and transfer policies of Metra and CTA.
- Rail station modifications would consolidate lower-volume rail stations on the Englewood/Jackson Park Line and the Metra Electric Main Line and Blue Island Branch. It would also improve parking and access at the remaining rail stations.
- Express bus conversion would convert the #6 and #14 express buses to local rail feeder buses. Instead of providing direct bus service to downtown Chicago, the buses would feed passengers to stations along the Englewood/Jackson Park and Dan Ryan elevated lines. The consultant did not originally recommend the express bus conversion alternative to the Technical Committee. The consultant noted that the negative impacts on the community outweighed the projected savings in operating costs. However, the Technical Committee included this proposal among the remaining alternatives because members believed that a closer analysis would demonstrate significant savings in operating costs.

Long-Term Alternatives

The three long-term alternatives propose the following:

- South Lakefront light rail would consist of a light rail line running south along the Metra Electric right-of-way to 69th Street and continuing along the route of the Metra Electric South Chicago Branch. An optional light rail spur would be added along Stony Island Avenue from 71st Street to 94th Street. The Englewood/Jackson Park Line, the Metra Electric South Chicago Branch, and the #6 and #14 express buses would be eliminated.
- King Drive light rail would eliminate the Englewood/Jackson Park Line and replace it with a new light rail transit line running south along King Drive from McCormick Place to 51st Street. This alternative would also eliminate the Metra Electric Blue Island Branch.
- Dan Ryan extension would extend the Dan Ryan Line down to 103rd Street and add a 2,000-car park-and-ride lot at the 103rd Street station. In addition, lower-volume rail stations on the Metra Electric Main Line and Blue Island Branch would be consolidated.

The Study's Public Participation Program

According to RTA and FTA officials, no federal, state, or local requirements for public participation apply to a long-range planning study such as the South Corridor Transit Study. However, RTA held community advisory meetings, briefed elected officials and community groups, and held two focus groups (small group discussions) to obtain comments from community members. Technical Committee members held different views on what constituted adequate public participation during a planning process. Community leaders found the opportunities for public participation inadequate.

Opportunities for Public Participation

According to RTA officials, the South Corridor Transit Study represented the first instance in which RTA sought public comment during a planning process. RTA officials said that they had incorporated a public participation program into the study because some of the planning alternatives would eliminate existing transit service in the South Corridor.

RTA participated in two large community meetings on the South Corridor Transit Study. The South Corridor Transit Coalition, a coalition of community groups, organized the first community meeting in December 1992; approximately 150 people attended. RTA organized the second community meeting in February 1993; between 400 and 500 people attended. RTA officials stated that they also discussed the study with individual community groups and elected officials representing the study area. RTA also received numerous phone calls and letters, as well as three sets of petitions, from corridor residents and riders concerning the proposals cited in the study.

RTA held two focus group sessions with 12 community members in June 1992. RTA asked the participants to evaluate the adequacy of transit service in the South Corridor and to recommend mechanisms that RTA could use to involve the public in the South Corridor Transit Study. Although the study's Technical Committee had approved the 13 planning alternatives for the South Corridor, RTA did not provide the focus group participants with information on the 13 alternatives under consideration.

In response to questions about how to obtain public participation, the focus group participants suggested that RTA rely on existing community organizations, involve public officials, conduct surveys, form a Citizens' Advisory Committee, and develop strategies to inform the public of the study's progress and findings. Participants also said that they wanted opportunities to participate in the study in addition to the focus group

sessions. RTA officials stated that they had originally planned to establish a Citizens' Advisory Committee in response to the participants' suggestion. However, they did not pursue this option because they believed that it would place an undue burden on the committee members to report back to other community members on the study's progress.

Adequacy of Opportunities for Public Participation

Through our discussions with community leaders, RTA officials, and Technical Committee members, we found fundamental differences of opinion on what would constitute an adequate level of public participation. Community leaders said that the public should be involved early in this long-range planning study because key questions, acted upon later, are formulated in the initial planning phases. Since the study includes proposals to eliminate major transit lines in their community, community leaders said that they should have the chance to discuss how key questions are asked.

According to RTA and other participating agency officials, it is difficult to judge when the public should become involved in a long-range planning effort. Because the public might become unnecessarily alarmed, officials do not believe that community members should become involved before alternatives that would eliminate service are found to be technically infeasible and are removed from further study.

One Technical Committee member suggested, however, that early public participation could lessen the perception that the committee was working behind closed doors. Steering Committee members were divided on when and to what extent they should incorporate the public's comments into this study. RTA's original plan to form a Citizens' Advisory Committee was changed to the more broad-based community outreach program because Steering Committee members could not agree on the appropriate level of public participation. RTA officials stated that the outreach programs are more inclusive, since they involve all interested citizens and organizations rather than selected community leaders.

RTA officials also noted their difficulty in finding any transit studies conducted over the past 10 years that would serve as models for developing a public participation component in studies proposing cutbacks in transit service. However, RTA's board of directors recently asked the agency to include public participation as an integral element of a study to rationalize transit service for the entire Chicago metropolitan area.

Implementing the Study's Recommendations

The South Corridor Transit Study Phase II Report is expected to be released in late August 1993. It will include the short- and long-range transit planning alternatives recommended by the consultant on the basis of its detailed analysis of the seven remaining alternatives.

We cannot predict whether the consultant will recommend one or more of the transit alternatives currently under consideration. However, several statutory and regulatory requirements for implementing any of these planning alternatives remain. Because of these requirements, imminent changes to transit service in the South Corridor appear unlikely.

The first requirement centers on RTA's authority to alter transit operations. Although RTA oversees long-range transit planning for the Chicago area, RTA officials told us that only the affected transit agencies—CTA and Metra—could implement any of the study's recommendations and alter transit service in the corridor.

In addition, if a transit agency should elect to make changes on the basis of the study's final report, it would have to comply with two important FTA requirements. First, if any transit project were taken out of service before the end of its useful life, the transit agency would have to pay back the depreciated fair market value of past federal investments. For example, since 1983, FTA has provided CTA with \$31 million in grants for improvements to the Englewood/Jackson Park Line. If CTA decided to close this line, it would have to return a yet-to-be determined portion of the federal investment.

Second, any major change in transit service would also have to be reviewed for compliance with title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. FTA would require the local transit agency, when effecting a major change, such as the elimination of a transit line, to hold a public hearing, at which any possible discriminatory effects of the change could be identified and addressed. FTA would also require the implementation of any of the long-range alternatives for the South Corridor to be consistent with the region's long-range transportation plan. Assuming federal financial support for new alignments, such as the proposed light rail system, FTA would require the transit agency to follow the steps mandated for major capital investments. These steps include conducting a detailed analysis of alternatives, developing a draft environmental impact statement, drafting a preliminary engineering design, completing a final environmental impact statement and completing the engineering design.

Section 3
Implementing the Study's Recommendations

In addition, the funds to implement any of the long-range alternatives and the null alternative may not be forthcoming. RTA officials stated that even if the transit agencies proposed to implement these alternatives, they would still have to identify the funding sources that would allow them to change the existing transit service.

Chronology of South Corridor Transit Study

Phase I

1987	Metra purchases Illinois Central Gulf Railroad's commuter assets. RTA approves purchase with a number of stipulations, one of which is that Metra conduct a productivity study.
Summer 1988	City of Chicago requests to be placed on South Corridor Transit Study Technical Committee.
January 1989	RTA assumes responsibility for South Corridor Transit Study from Metra and begins work on Phase I.
Spring 1989	Consultant—Multisystems, Inc.—is hired in March 1989. Riders are surveyed in May 1989.
December 1989 to March 1990	Scope of South Corridor Transit Study is expanded to (1) include a wider range of travel demand, (2) consider impacts on community development, and (3) include additional participants, in response to city of Chicago's comments on study's progress.
June 1991	A representative of the Chicago Area Transportation Study becomes a member of the Technical Committee.
Summer 1991	Technical Committee develops 13 alternatives.
September 1991	South Corridor Transit Study Phase I Report and Appendixes are released.

Phase II

February 7, 1992	Invitations are sent to the heads of CTA, Metra, and Pace; to the South Suburban Mayors and Managers Association; and to Chicago's Commissioners of Transportation and Planning to serve on the Steering Committee for Phase II of the study.
June 10, 1992	Technical Committee meets and approves results of Phase II consultant's—STV/Seelye, Stevenson, Value, and Knecht—Fatal Flaw Screening Analysis of the 13 planning alternatives.
June 24-25, 1992	Focus group sessions are held at the Museum of Science and Industry.
July 8, 1992	Phase II consultant's Technical Memorandum: Fatal Flaw Screening Analysis is released.
July 15, 1992	Steering Committee meets and approves Phase II consultant's Fatal Flaw Screening Analysis—the seven alternatives.
September 1992	Focus Group Report is released.

(continued)

Appendix I
Chronology of South Corridor Transit Study

December 29, 1992	Community meeting, organized by the South Corridor Transit Coalition, is held at the South Shore Cultural Center. RTA and Phase II consultant present study. Coalition members and concerned citizens ask RTA chairman for, among other things, (1) citizen representation on study's Technical Committee, (2) a more detailed economic development analysis of the transit planning alternatives, and (3) support for a "public transit summit" including Governor Edgar, Mayor Daley, and community members.
February 10, 1993	Community Advisory Meeting is held at Chicago State University.

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