

Fair Transit South Cook

PILOT PROGRAM SECOND-YEAR REPORT



Honorable Toni Preckwinkle
President, Cook County
Board of Commissioners

Jennifer "Sis" Killen, P.E., PTOE
Superintendent

A project delivered by the Cook
County Department of Transportation



Note from the President

Dear Cook County Residents,

With another year of the Fair Transit South Cook pilot program complete, I’m happy to say that our work has made transportation more affordable and convenient for residents of south Cook County. Historically, residents of south Cook spent more of their money on transportation, and more of their time commuting, than any other place in the County. Through Fair Transit, we have begun tackling some of the most pressing inequities in transportation and provided new options to under-resourced communities.

Part of what makes the Fair Transit South Cook pilot noteworthy is the innovative spirit behind it. Around the country and in this region, transit agencies face reduced ridership and revenue due to COVID-19, a change that is spurring new fare products, new strategies and new partnerships to address the lasting impacts of the pandemic. In the future, we will have to rethink the funding of the transit system in the region and reinvent the way it operates. As we learn more about what works and what our residents need, we will adjust Fair Transit to ensure it meets our residents’ evolving needs.

I’m very proud of our work with the Fair Transit program and grateful for our partnership with Metra and Pace Suburban Bus.

Sincerely,

Toni Preckwinkle, President
Cook County Board of Commissioners

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Introduction

This report documents outcomes from the second year of Fair Transit South Cook, an award-winning three-year pilot program that provides better and more affordable transportation options to south Cook County and the south side of Chicago. The pilot launched in January 2021 in partnership with the region’s transit agencies and is led by Cook County’s Department of Transportation and Highways (DoTH). The study area for the pilot program is shown in Figure 1.

The pilot has two components:

Reduce fares by up to **50%** on the Metra Electric (ME) and Rock Island (RI) lines, and

Increasing service on Pace Route 352 Halsted by **25%** and add trains on the ME and RI

Looking ahead, the pilot will also lay the groundwork for seamless transfers across transit agencies as well as exploring options for income-based reduced fares. More history and context for Fair Transit South Cook can be found in the report for the first year of the pilot at <https://www.cookcountyil.gov/service/fair-transit-south-cook>.

Fair Transit South Cook Pilot Area and Fare Zones

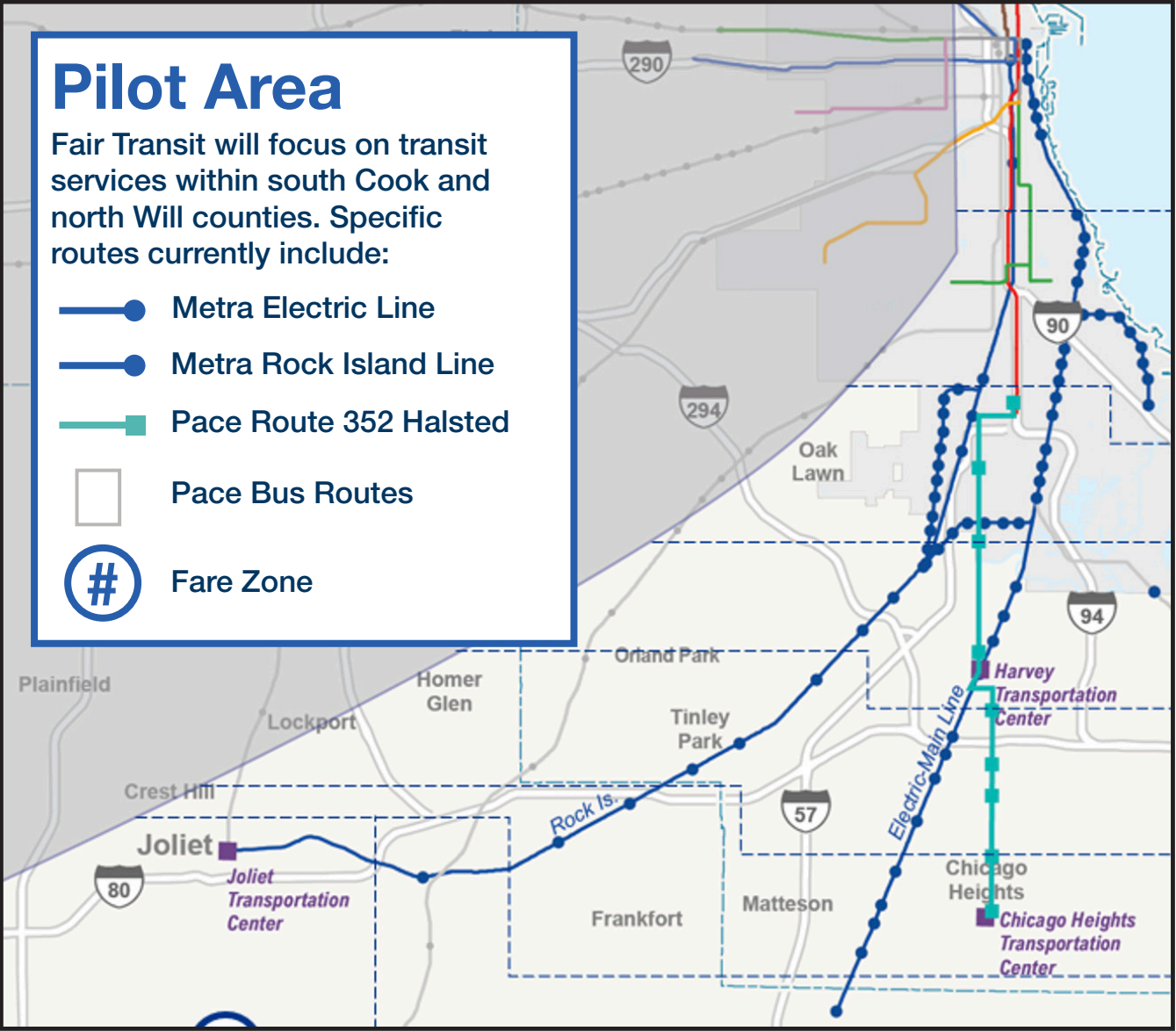


Figure 1 - Fair Transit Pilot Area



Program Implementation

The Fair Transit South Cook pilot launched on January 4, 2021 with reduced fares on ME/RI lines and enhanced service on Pace Route 352 Halsted, as shown in Figure 3 and Figure 4 (on page 7). Metra uses a distance-based fare system with Zone A being the closest to downtown Chicago and Zone H being the farthest. The pilot’s reduced fares are automatically applied to One-Way and 10-Ride tickets as well as Monthly Passes. The Fair Transit South Cook pilot allows anyone riding ME/RI to pay the reduced fares previously available only to seniors, riders with disabilities, military personnel and students.

Metra made several fare policy changes in 2022 that affected the ME/RI lines. In July, Metra introduced its Super Saver pass, which allows riders unlimited travel to any zone within a month for \$100. This fare policy change was intended to help rebuild ridership as well as to encourage riders to purchase monthly passes, which had been used for the majority of rides but have declined steeply since the pandemic began. On the ME and RI lines, the Fair Transit pilot further reduced the Super Saver pass to \$70 per month.

At approximately the same time, CTA and Pace overhauled an existing add-on pass offered with the Metra monthly pass. The add-on pass was rebranded as the Regional Connect Pass, making it valid for unlimited travel on CTA and Pace, and reducing its price from \$55 to \$30. This new product is a major step toward fare integration among the systems.

Also, in October, the University of Chicago began a promotion in which it purchased 10-Ride tickets for students and staff. These tickets are valid for travel to all zones on the ME. By November 2022, more than 4,500 10-Ride tickets had been distributed.

Aside from minor changes to the ME schedule in May, Metra did not significantly change service on the pilot lines in 2022. Service enhancements that began in 2021 continued, including service levels on weekends on the ME Line and during weekdays on the RI Line that exceed pre-pandemic levels.

Metra continued to reintroduce service to other lines throughout 2022, adding approximately 18% more weekday trains and 20% more weekend trains relative to 2021 (Figure 2). The changes in service indirectly affect the relative ridership recovery rate on the ME/RI lines.



The Pace portion of the Fair Transit South Cook pilot includes expanded service on Route 352 Halsted for the 16 miles between the CTA Red Line 95th/ Dan Ryan Station and the Pace Chicago Heights Terminal. The Fair Transit pilot ensures longer hours of operation and increased frequency of buses seven days a week (Table 1 and Table 2 on page 8). As an example, for riders in the communities of Harvey, East Hazel Crest, Homewood, Glenwood and Chicago Heights, instead of the previous two buses per hour, per direction, during weekday peak hours, there are now six buses per hour, per direction. The expansion of service on Route 352 has increased annual vehicle hours by 25% relative to 2020 service, from roughly 68,000 hours to 85,000 hours. No significant changes were made to this over 2022 aside from schedule changes needed to accommodate bus driver unavailability, an issue that continued in 2022 across the Pace system (as well as CTA).

Pace secured a \$20 million federal grant in summer 2022 to upgrade the Harvey Transportation Center. Metra announced the Metra Electric Community Initiative, a plan to modernize 13 stations on the line. As part of that effort, Metra approved a \$34 million contract to completely rebuild and make accessible the 79th, 87th and 103rd Street stations on the ME Line in Chicago. Another \$14.5 million contract was awarded in October to rebuild the Homewood station, partly funded by Cook County. Work began in May to rebuild the 147th Street/Sibley Boulevard Station in Harvey, a \$20 million project Cook County also helped fund through Invest in Cook. With assistance from Cook County, Metra secured federal funding in fall 2022 for the reconstruction of the 95th Street/Chicago State University station. The agency was also awarded federal funding in fall to rebuild the 59th/60th Street station. On the RI Line, Metra began the rehabilitation of Blue Island Vermont Street station and also broke ground on the long-awaited new Auburn Park station.

In addition, Metra, Pace, Cook County and other partners made strides over 2022 to improve station infrastructure that supports the Fair Transit pilot.

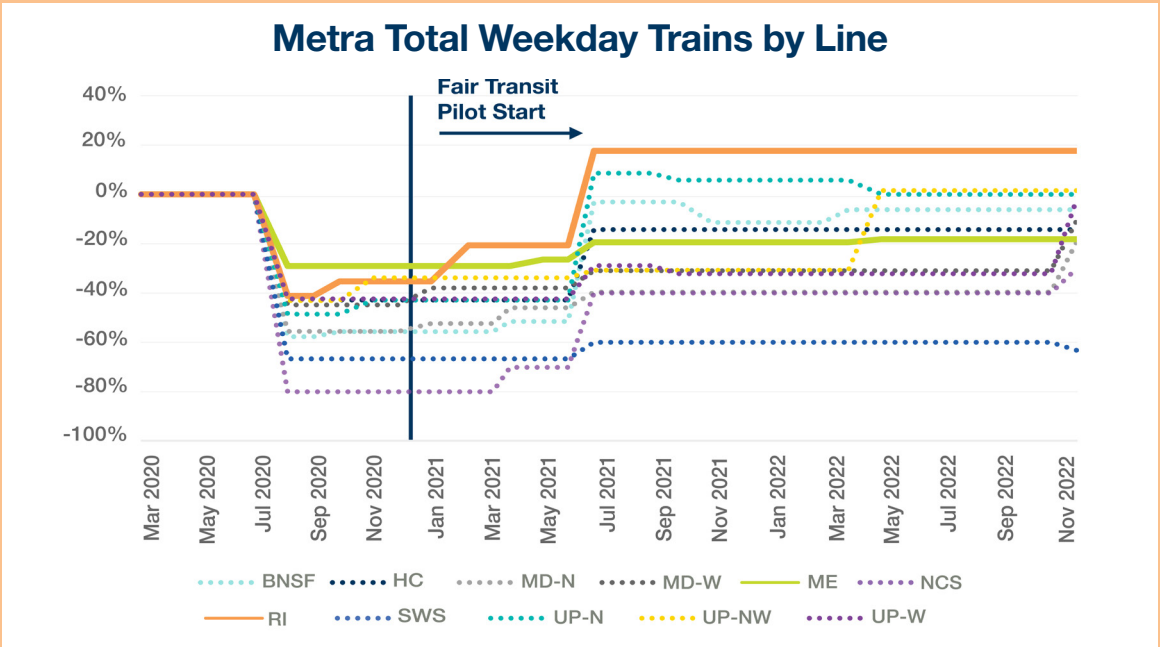


Figure 2 – Metra Total Weekday Trains by Line (relative to February 2020)

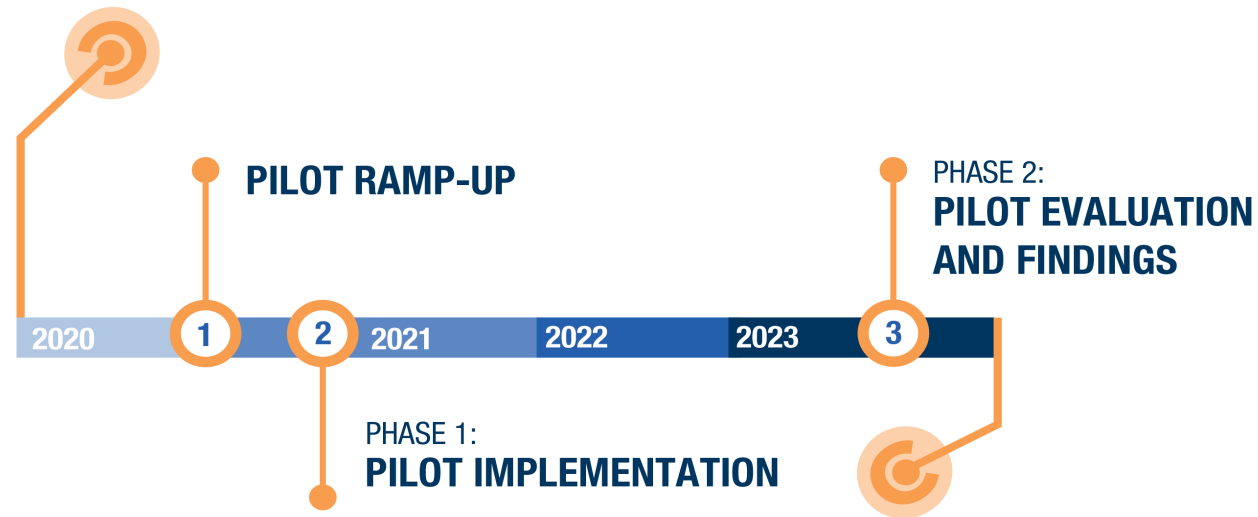


Figure 3 - Pilot Project Timeline

Metra Fair Transit Pilot Fare Reduction Table

| Fare Zone | One Way | | 10-Ride | | Monthly | |
|-----------|----------|-----------|----------|-----------|----------|-----------|
| | New Fare | % reduced | New Fare | % reduced | New Fare | % reduced |
| A | \$2.00 | 50% | \$19.00 | 50% | \$70.00 | 30% |
| B | \$2.00 | 53% | \$19.00 | 53% | \$70.00 | 30% |
| C | \$2.75 | 50% | \$26.25 | 50% | \$70.00 | 30% |
| D | \$3.00 | 52% | \$28.50 | 52% | \$70.00 | 30% |
| E | \$3.25 | 52% | \$31.00 | 52% | \$70.00 | 30% |
| F | \$3.50 | 52% | \$33.25 | 52% | \$70.00 | 30% |
| G | \$3.75 | 52% | \$35.75 | 52% | \$70.00 | 30% |
| H | \$4.00 | 52% | \$38.00 | 52% | \$70.00 | 30% |

Figure 4 – Summary of Metra Fare Reductions

Service Between the CTA Red Line 95th/Dan Ryan Station and the Pace Chicago Heights Terminal

| | Weekly* | Saturday* | Sunday* |
|----------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| Current: | 4:48am-12:12am | 5:42am-12:06am | 7:08am-11:07pm |
| New: | 3:48am-1:42am | 4:40am-1:06am | 6:10am-12:07am |

Table 1 - Hours of Service, Pace Route 352 Halsted

*Route 352 will continue to operate 24 hours a day between the CTA Red Line 95th/Dan Ryan Station and the Pace Harvey Transportation Center; those hours are not reflected in this chart.

Service Between the CTA Red Line 95th/Dan Ryan Station and the Pace Chicago Heights Terminal

| | Weekly* | Saturday* | Sunday* |
|----------|--|---------------|---------------|
| Current: | Peak 30 minutes/Off-Peak 30-60 minutes | 30 minutes | 30-60 minutes |
| New: | Peak 10 minutes/Off-Peak 15-30 minutes | 15-30 minutes | 30 minutes |

Table 2 - Service Improvements, Pace Route 352 Halsted

*Some weekday, Saturday and Sunday trips on Route 352 will continue to only operate between the CTA Red Line 95th/Dan Ryan Station and the Pace Harvey Transportation Center; those trips are not reflected in this chart.

The Fair Transit South Cook pilot is funded through motor fuel tax revenue distributed to Cook County by the State of Illinois. The County has budgeted \$30 million over three years to reimburse Metra for lost revenue from reduced fares. Between January and December 2022, the County reimbursed Metra \$13.8 million. Metra’s service increases are funded from other sources.

The County budgeted \$2.7 million toward operating costs for the Pace Route 352 Halsted component of the pilot, which was largely used by the end of 2022.

As part of its 2022 budget, Pace made the increase in service permanent. Going forward, the service increase will continue but will be funded from other sources.

The pilot will continue through 2023 and a final pilot evaluation will be published. Cook County received an Accelerating Innovative Mobility grant of \$330,000 from the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) for the pilot, which will help pay for marketing and includes an independent evaluation of the pilot program by the FTA.

Second-year Evaluation

Metra Ridership

ME/RI as a Percentage of System Ridership

Ridership grew on the ME/RI lines from 341,000 in December 2021 to 455,000 in December 2022, although the highest ridership in the year occurred in October (587,000). Except for January and February, when ridership was still depressed by the spread of the COVID-19 Omicron variant, 2022 ridership exceeded that of 2021 in all months. Total ridership on the Metra system grew from 1,400,000 to 1,900,000 over the same period, with ridership high of 2,400,000 in August. Due to growth in both Metra system ridership as well as the pilot lines, the best way to evaluate the effects of the pilot on the ME/RI is to compare relative growth.

The ME/RI lines continue to represent a higher share of systemwide ridership than they did before the pandemic. This may be partially attributed to the fact that many workers within

the study area have jobs in the healthcare or education industries, which typically require employees to work on site. As during other times in the pandemic, employees shifted to remote work during the Omicron surge in late 2021 and early 2022. As a result, ME/RI ridership jumped in late 2021 and early 2022 as a percentage of system ridership because fewer workers taking other Metra lines were coming into the office.

As shown in Figure 6, the ME Line carries more of the system's ridership than the RI Line. In the final months of 2022, the percentage carried by the ME increased even more, potentially due to the bulk purchase of 10-Ride tickets for students and staff by the University of Chicago.

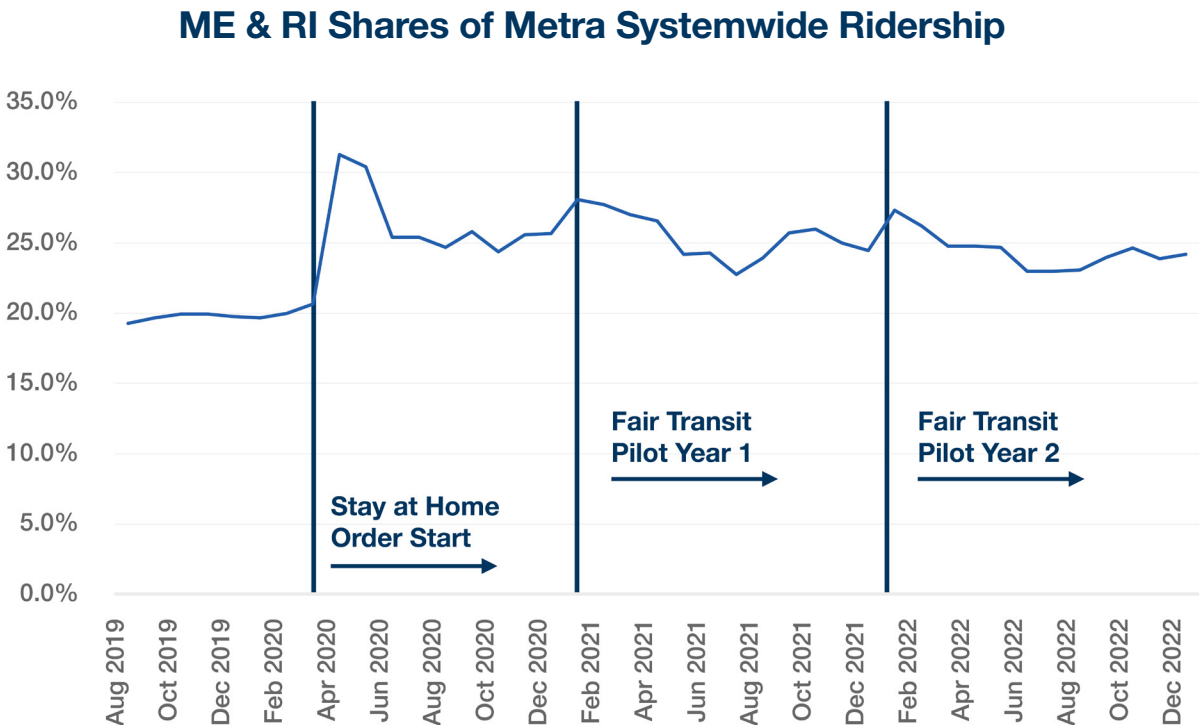


Figure 5 - ME + RI Lines Share of Metra Systemwide Ridership

ME & RI Shares of Metra Systemwide Ridership

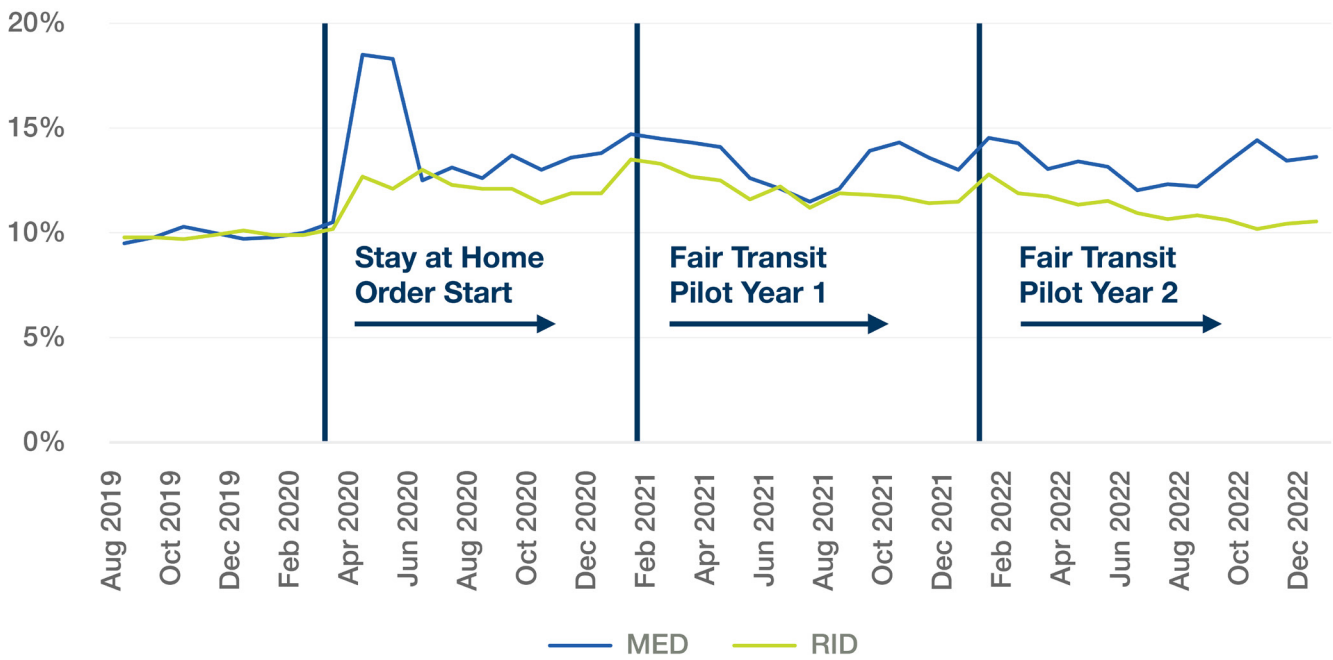


Figure 6 – ME & RI Shares of Metra Systemwide Ridership

ME/RI Recovery Rate Compared to System

Ridership on the ME/RI lines continued to recover faster than the other Metra lines in 2022. While the difference between the ME/RI and the Metra system recovery rates narrowed, it was still greater than it was before the pilot began, consistent with the expectation that reduced fares would encourage ridership (Figure 7 on page 11). The recovery rate is the slope of the lines in Figure 7 during the periods April – October. Ridership recovery on the Metra system is also strongly influenced by employees returning to the office, which continued to increase in 2022 over 2021.

Since more ME/RI riders were already working on site, the recovery rate slowed on ME/RI relative to the rest of the system. Furthermore, Metra increased service on several other lines in 2022 relative to the ME and RI, which also decreased the relative recovery rate. Finally, the recovery rate jumped in July for both the ME/RI and the system, likely due to the introduction of the Super Saver pass. However, the increase is higher for the ME/RI lines, likely because Fair Transit South Cook makes the Super Saver pass even more affordable.

¹David Roeder. "Half of Chicago workers now back in the office, for first time since pandemic began." Chicago Sun Times. Feb. 8, 2023. Accessed March 15, 2023. Notes: data from Kastle Systems, a provider of building security systems, reported office occupancy levels in Chicago were greater than 50% in late January. This is the first time office occupancy has exceeded 50% since the pandemic shutdown, which occurred in March 2020.

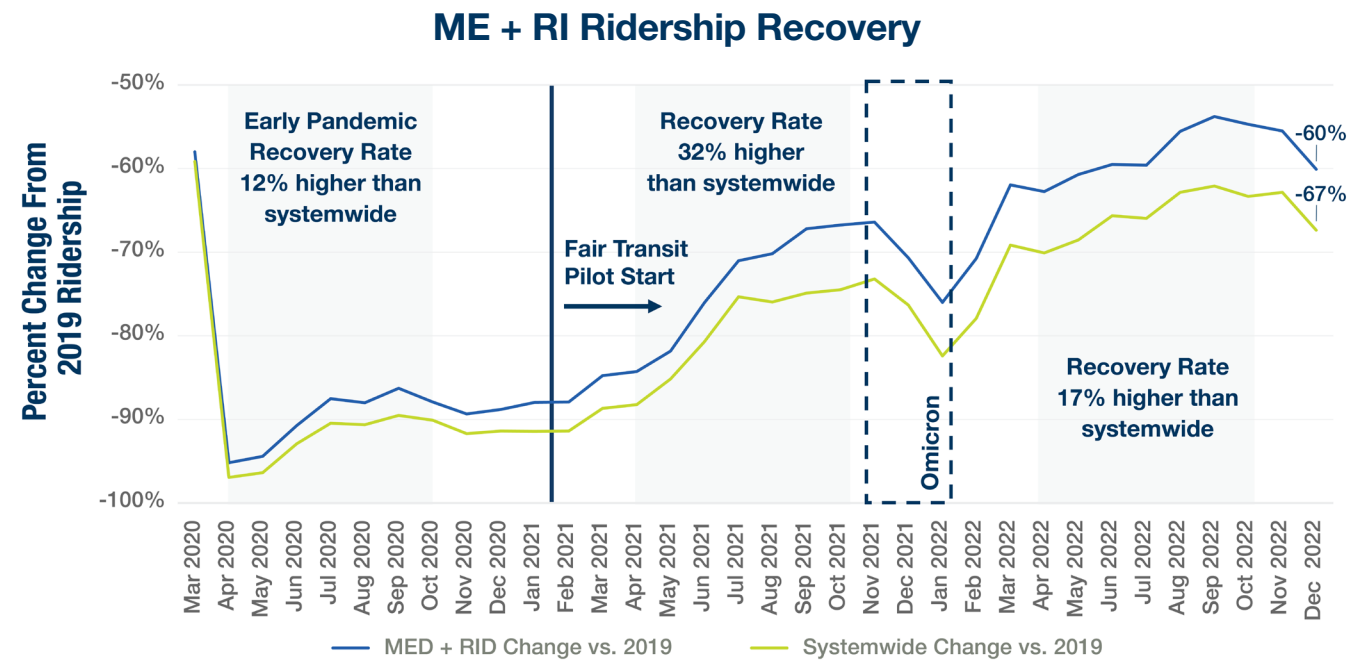


Figure 7 - ME + RI Ridership Recovery

Ridership by Time Period

Weekend ridership on the ME/RI has recovered much faster than weekday ridership (Figure 8), to the point that weekend ridership began to exceed pre-pandemic levels by mid-2022. The recovery of weekend ridership on ME/RI is well above that of the overall Metra system. Weekend travel tends to be more discretionary and may be influenced to a greater degree by reduced fares, compared to weekday travel. However, the effect of Fair Transit South Cook is somewhat ambiguous given that Metra introduced \$7 One Day Weekend passes at about the same time as the pilot. Furthermore, the increase in weekend ridership is affected by enhanced service, which started in July 2021 and is also higher than pre-pandemic levels.

On weekdays, trips outside the peak periods as well as peak period reverse direction trips (“reverse peak”) have grown faster than peak ridership (Figure 9). Reverse peak ridership on the ME Line began to exceed pre-pandemic levels in August 2022.



ME Ridership Recovery by Service Period

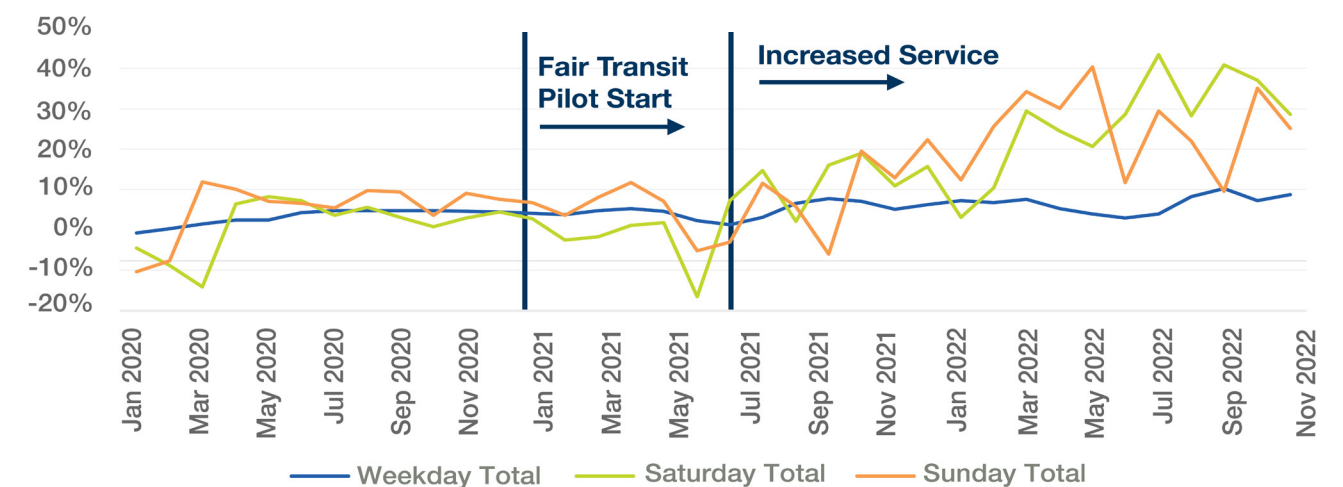


Figure 8 – ME Ridership Recovery by Service Period (relative to 2019)

ME Weekday Ridership by Service Period

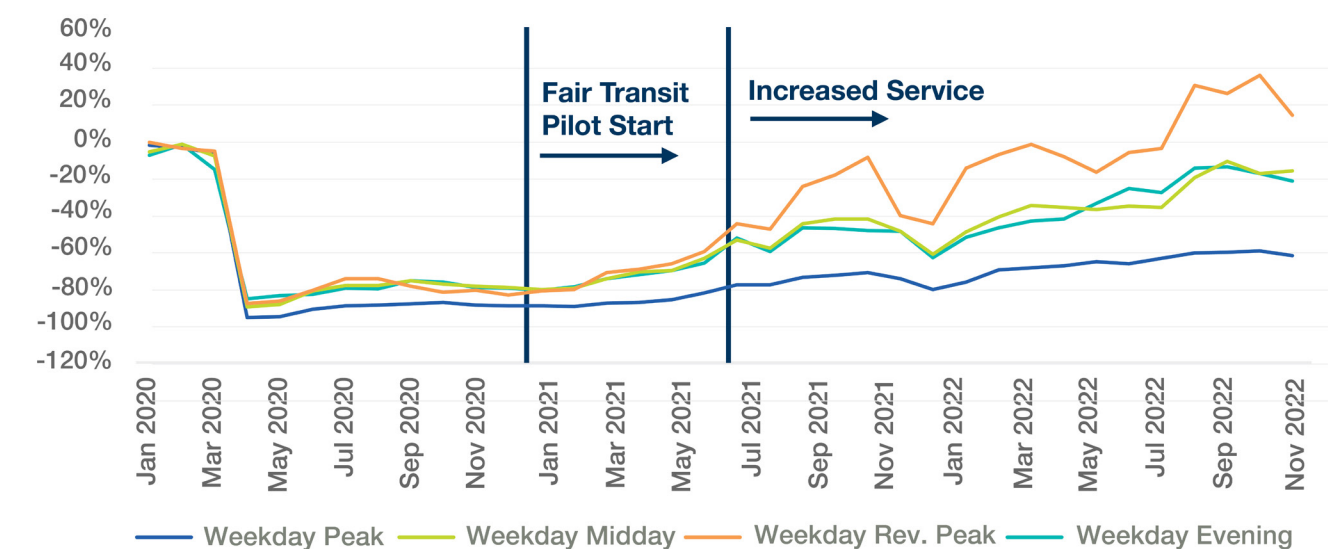


Figure 9 - ME Line Weekday Ridership by Service Period (versus 2019)

Change in ME/RI Ridership by Income Level

A major purpose of Fair Transit South Cook is to make transit more affordable.

To evaluate this goal, ridership data was gathered for each fare zone, and the fare zones were then categorized as high-, middle-, or low-income based on the poverty rate of the census tracts near each zone’s stations (Figure 10). Ridership by station area income level is illustrated in Figure 11 (on page 15).

As found in the first-year report, the pilot continues to benefit low-income neighborhoods on the ME Line, and in fact the percentage of riders coming from low-income fare zones on the ME grew relative to 2021. Low-income fare zone ridership is up 20% since Q1 2021. The B Zone comprises the largest part of the increase. On the RI Line, the primary rider is boarding in high-income zones, but the percentages from different zones are similar to pre-pandemic levels.



Fair Transit South Cook Community Income Levels

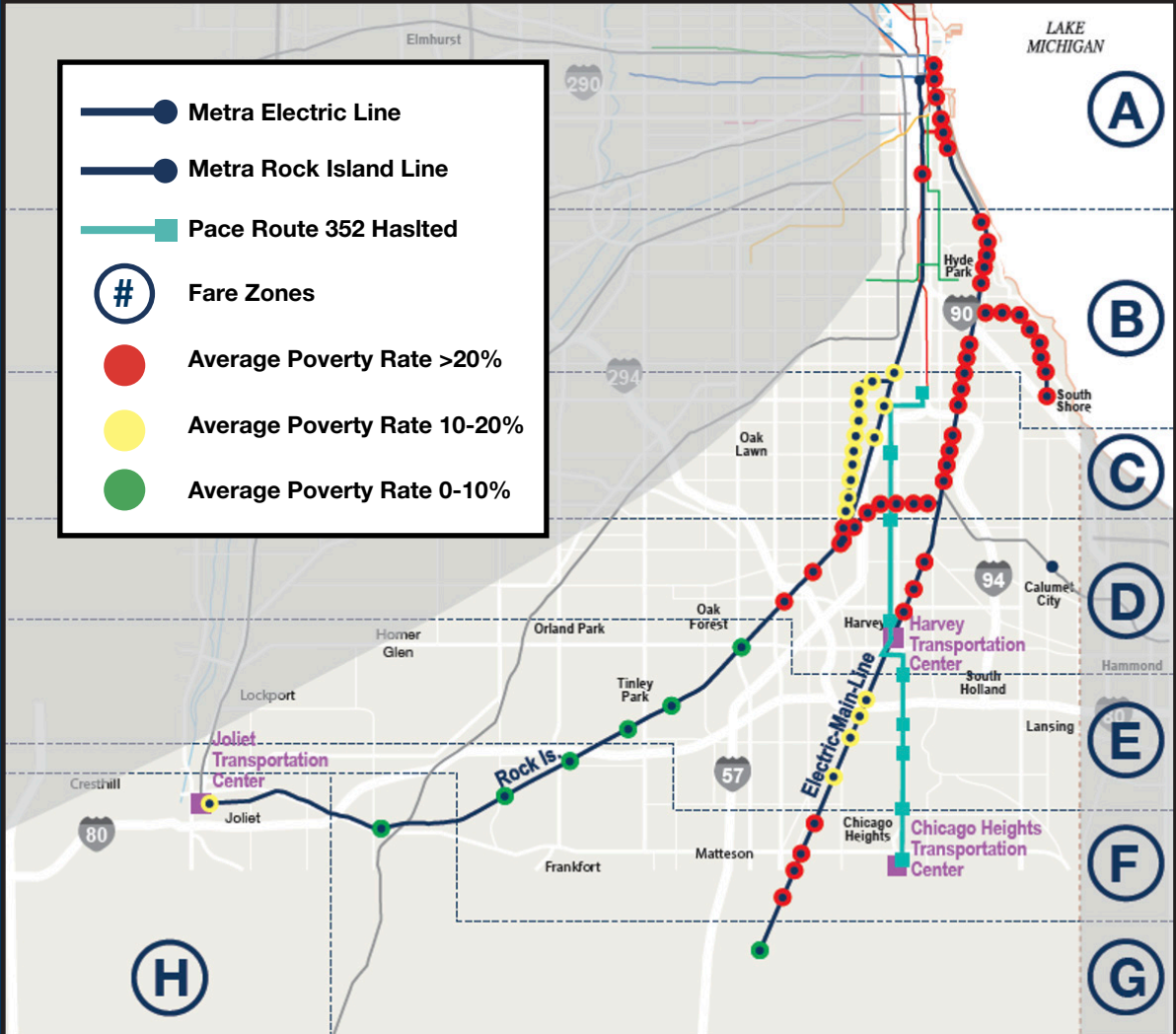


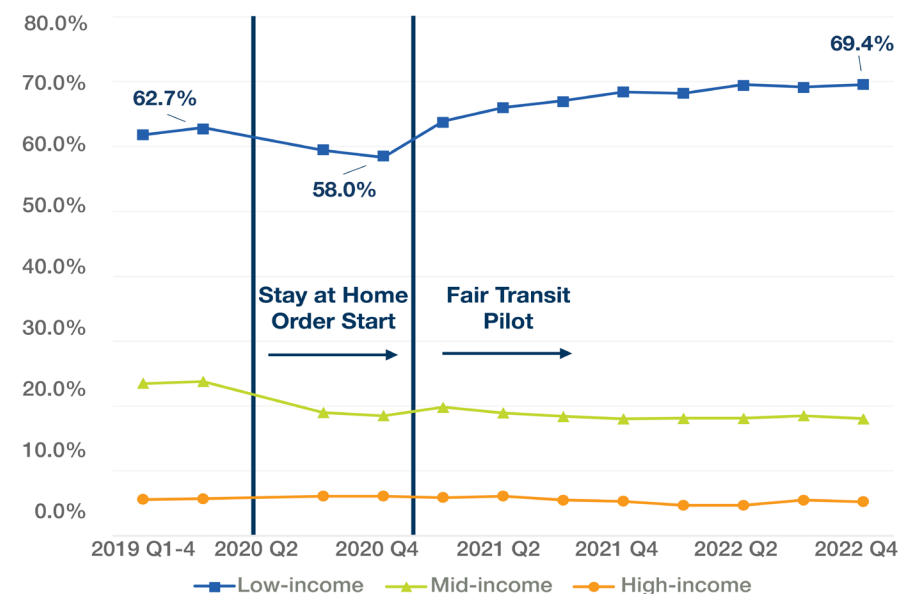
Figure 10 - Fair Transit South Cook Community Income Levels



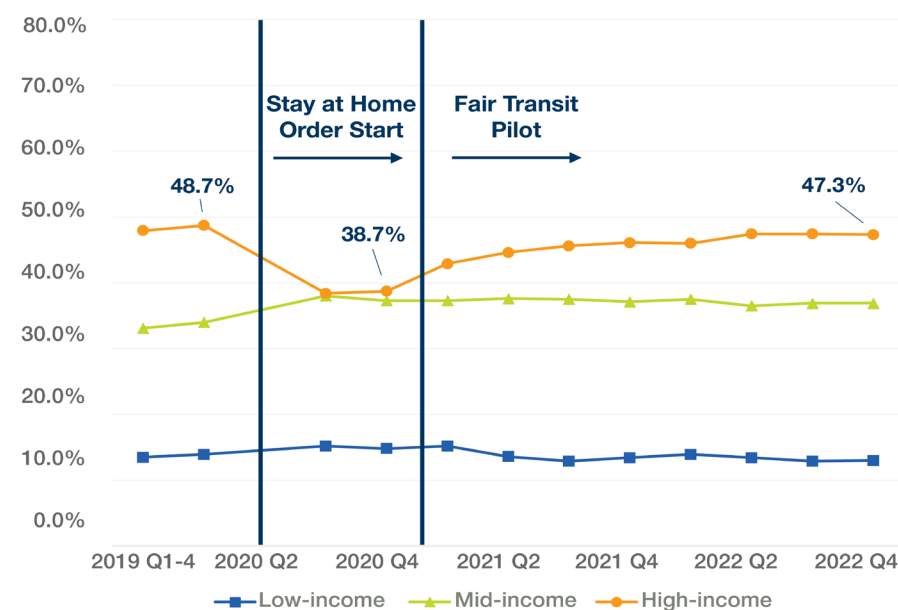
²Census tracts were allocated to a zone based on the distribution of origins from the Metra 2019 Origin-Design Survey, and thus the distance from the station varied based on how far riders typically traveled to board at the station. A high-income tract contained 0% to 10% of residents in poverty, mid-income contained 10% to 20% and low-income 20% or more. Poverty rate statistics were gathered from Esri Business Analyst. Note that a direct measure of the personal income of riders is not available.

Figure 11 - Share of ME / RI Riders by Fare Zone Income Level

Share of ME Riders by Fare Zone Income Level



Share of RI Riders by Fare Zone Income Level



Second-year Evaluation

Pace Ridership

Route 352 Halsted

To evaluate the impact of the increased service on Route 352, the project team compared the route to benchmark routes in other areas of the Pace system (Routes 303, 305, 307, 309, 310, 317, and 318). These routes were selected based on similar demographic characteristics. The project team also created market area routes, which are other Pace routes located in the pilot study area (Routes 353, 359, 379, 381, 383, 384, 385, and 386). The groups of routes are shown in Figure 12.

Illustrated in Figure 13 (on page 17), ridership as a percentage of the Pace system for Route 352, the benchmark routes and the market area routes were 6%, 10% and 11% before the pandemic, respectively. These percentages jumped in the early months of the pandemic as more discretionary riders in the rest of the system stopped riding. By the end of 2022, these routes had settled back to shares of ridership similar to the numbers before the pandemic. Market area routes in the Pace South Division have regained some ground during 2022 and Route 352 has remained flat as a percentage of total ridership.

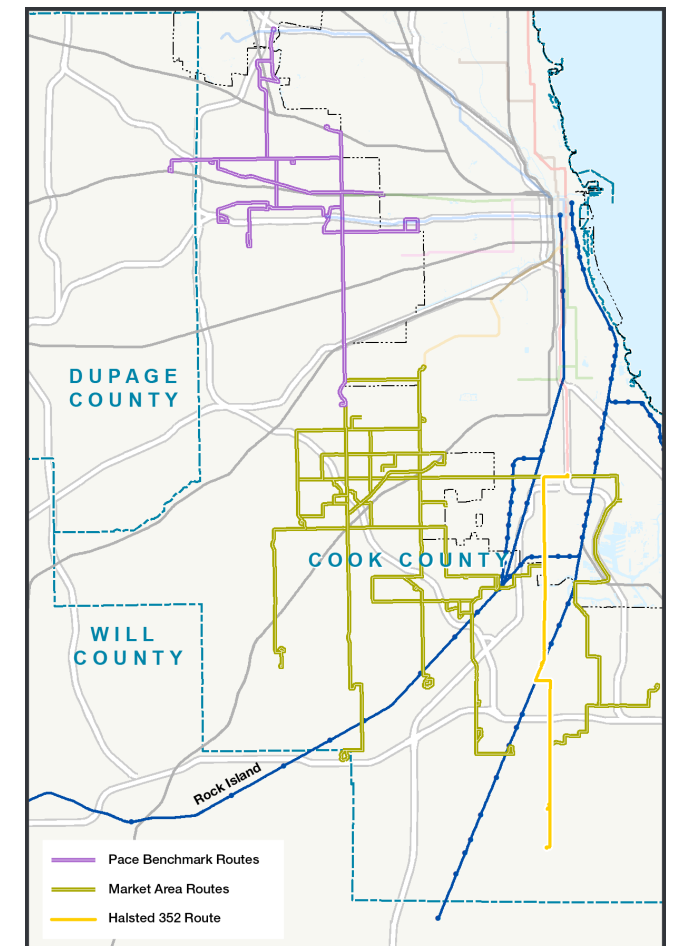


Figure 12 - Pace Evaluation Routes



Fair Transit South Cook Year 2 Survey Evaluation

To date, three surveys have been conducted for the Fair Transit South Cook Pilot.

- 1. Pre-Pilot Survey (October 2020 – January 2021); **551 Responses**
- 2. Year 1 Survey (July 2021 – October 2021); **513 Responses**
- 3. Year 2 Survey (December 2022); **522 Responses**

Questions in the Year 2 survey were designed to understand riders' perception of transit experience improvements, ridership patterns, boarding locations, and reasons why people choose to ride transit.

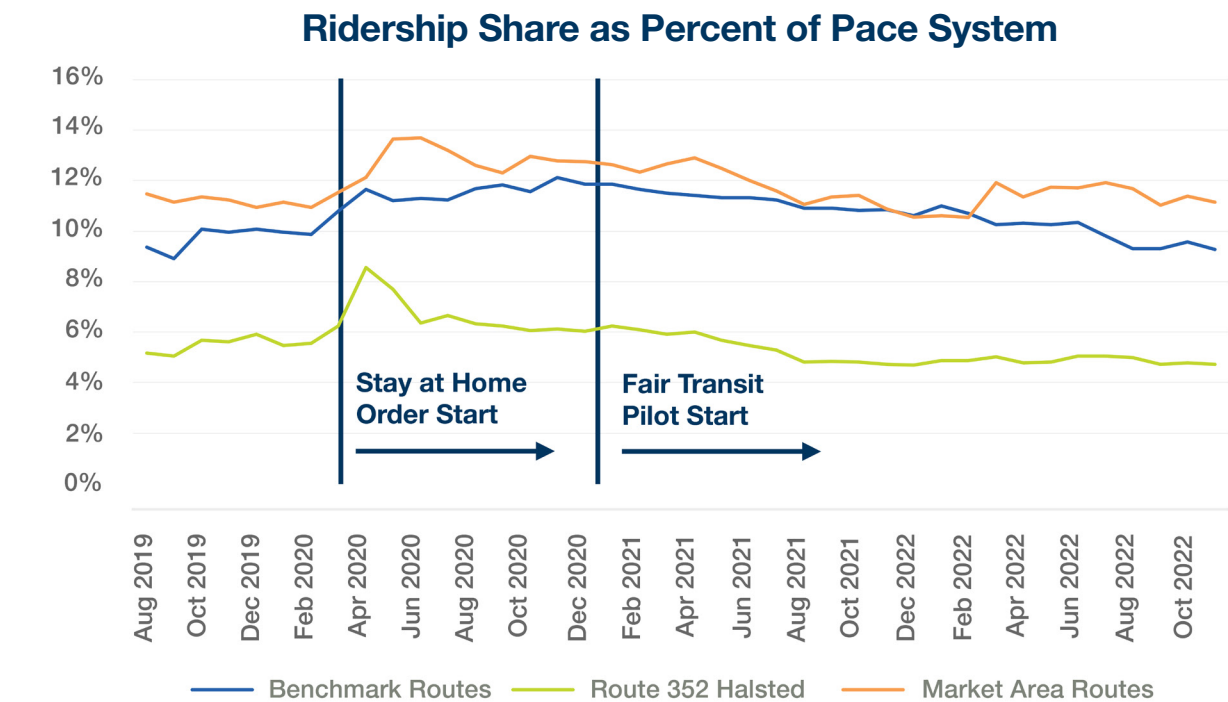


Figure 13 - Ridership Share as Percent of Pace System

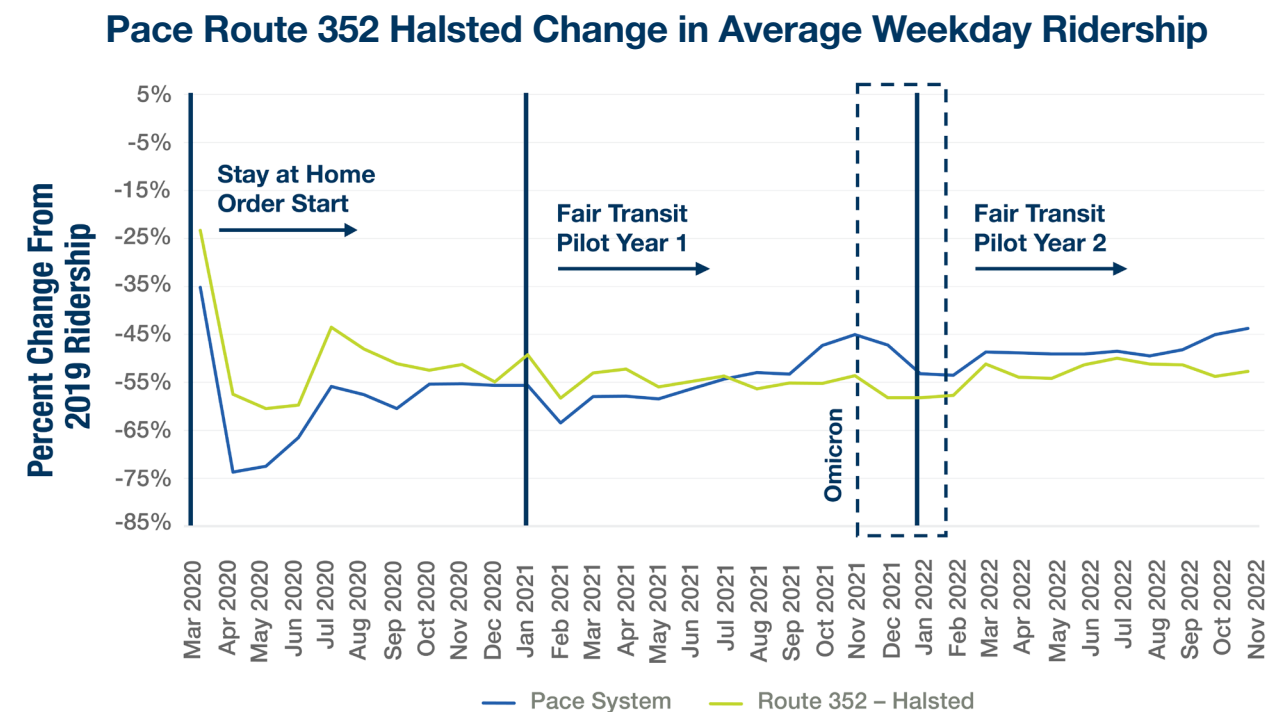
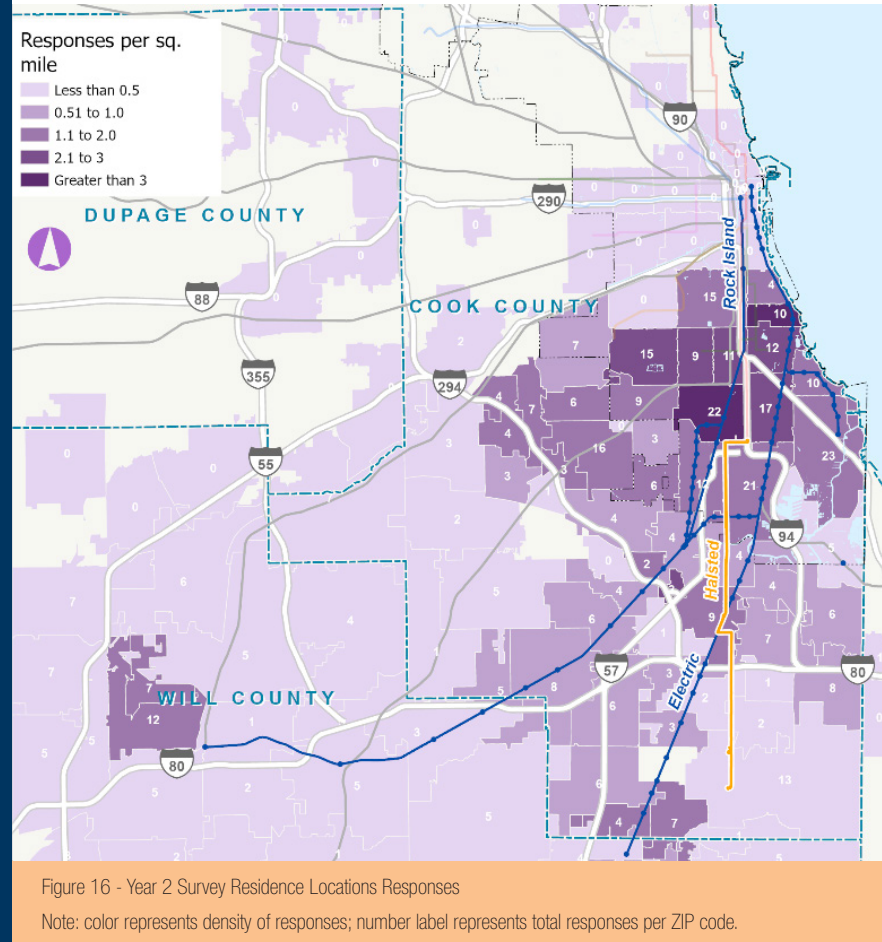


Figure 14 - Pace Route 352 Halsted Change in Average Weekday Ridership



Figure 16 illustrates location of residence of survey respondents. Most respondents live in the northern part of the study area and east of I-294, but responses were also received from places such as Chicago Heights and Lemont as well as areas further south including Joliet and Plainfield. Most respondents believe the Fair Transit pilot has improved their transit experience on the ME/RI or Pace 352 (69%). Of this group, 31% of respondents' experience was greatly improved, while 38% said it was somewhat improved. The most important impacts of the Fair Transit pilot are affordability (35%) as well as improved access to work, school, and



Ridership Patterns

- Approximately **25%** of respondents reported taking ME/RI more since the beginning of the year because of reduced fares. This is a lower percentage than in 2021, consistent with a slower recovery rate in 2022. Most of these riders say they are using the ME/RI an additional one to three days per week.
- Of the extra trips being taken on ME/RI, **54%** are for travel to work, reinforcing the importance of Fair Transit in helping people in south Cook reach jobs. Fair Transit has also enhanced residents' lives in other ways, including recreation/entertainment (**20%** of new trips) and school (**17%**).
- The survey showed **31%** of those taking Metra would have driven a car if not for Fair Transit South Cook, a similar percentage to 2021. Furthermore, the extra trips on Metra are primarily occurring during weekday peak periods (**54%**), which is helping take cars off the road at a time of resurgent congestion. This year's survey continues to show that a substantial portion of riders (**20%**) are boarding at stations closer to their homes rather than driving to a cheaper fare zone to board as they did before the pilot. By reducing single occupancy vehicle travel, the pilot has provided environmental benefits and helped to reduce congestion.
- The survey showed **18%** of respondents have taken Pace more since the beginning of the year. Trip purposes are similar to the ME/RI: most people taking additional trips on Pace Route 352 Halsted are traveling to work (**51%**), but others are using Pace for recreation/entertainment (**26%**) and school (**14%**). The extra trips are primarily occurring during weekday peak periods (**53%**) and weekdays non-peak periods (**36%**).

Importance of Affordability and Seamlessness

- The ability to travel seamlessly via a single payment card remains important to respondents, underlining the value of the fare integration element within the Fair Transit South Cook pilot. Efforts by Chicagoland transit agencies to pursue implementing interoperability changes, such as a single payment system, may also help reduce transfer costs and support transit-dependent riders who typically require transfers and multi-seat trips.
- Affordability continues to be the most important issue to survey respondents. More than half of all survey respondents have household incomes **less than \$50,000** and 20% have household incomes **less than \$25,000**. Being able to reduce fares on Metra to promote use by riders at all income levels, particularly transit dependent riders, is a key outcome of the pilot.

Marketing Campaign

Maintenance and Hyperlocal Campaign

During the first year of the Fair Transit South Cook pilot, various promotional tactics including on-the-ground outreach, digital engagement and marketing strategies were deployed to raise awareness of the pilot program and increase ridership among a large demographic audience. The metrics from the first campaign helped shape the outreach and promotional approach for the second year of the pilot. The campaign ran between **August 29, 2022 and November 7, 2022** and included traditional outdoor, programmatic digital display banners, YouTube video and social media advertising.

Outreach Methods

A hyperlocal approach was used to ensure visibility at the neighborhood level to residents who may not have been reached by the previous campaign. Ten outdoor advertisements were placed at the ME and RI stations and the I-57, I-95, and I-90 expressway entrances and exits from September 1 to November 6, 2022, leading to approximately 3.12 million impressions.



Figure 17 - Image of Outdoor Billboards

A digital campaign also targeted specific demographics within close proximity to ME and RI stations. Digital display banners produced approximately 2.33 million impressions with a 0.24% clickthrough rate, far exceeding the industry benchmark of 0.05 – 0.07%.



Figure 18 - Image of Banner Ad

A 30-second promotional video spot highlighting the success of the Fair Transit pilot was produced and embedded within YouTube videos as an advertisement and accounted for over 700,000 impressions. The ad, which featured an interview with a Metra rider highlighting her ability to use the savings from the reduced fare for other important household needs, had a completion rate of approximately 62%, which is markedly higher than the industry benchmark of 35%.



Figure 19 - Image from YouTube Video

Social media continued to be the most effective form of advertising. The Year 2 Facebook advertising campaign received the highest clickthrough rate of each advertising method. With nearly 200,000 impressions, Facebook ads earned a clickthrough rate of 0.65%. Instagram ads reached approximately 89,000 users, with a clickthrough rate of 0.25%.



Figure 20 - Image from Social Media Ad

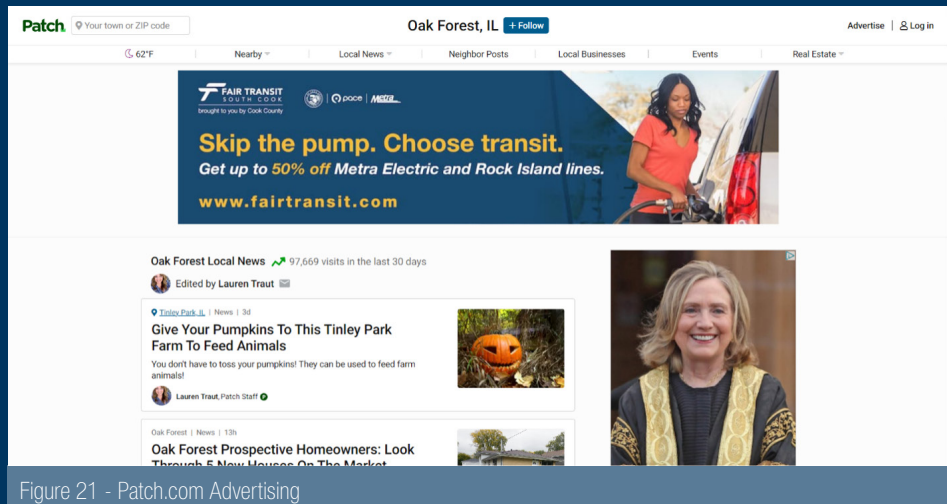


Figure 21 - Patch.com Advertising

Finally, the campaign used the local news aggregator site, Patch.com, to target specific areas through banner ads, advertorial spotlights, and e-newsletter exposure, producing an additional 610,000 impressions, with a clickthrough rate of 0.16%.



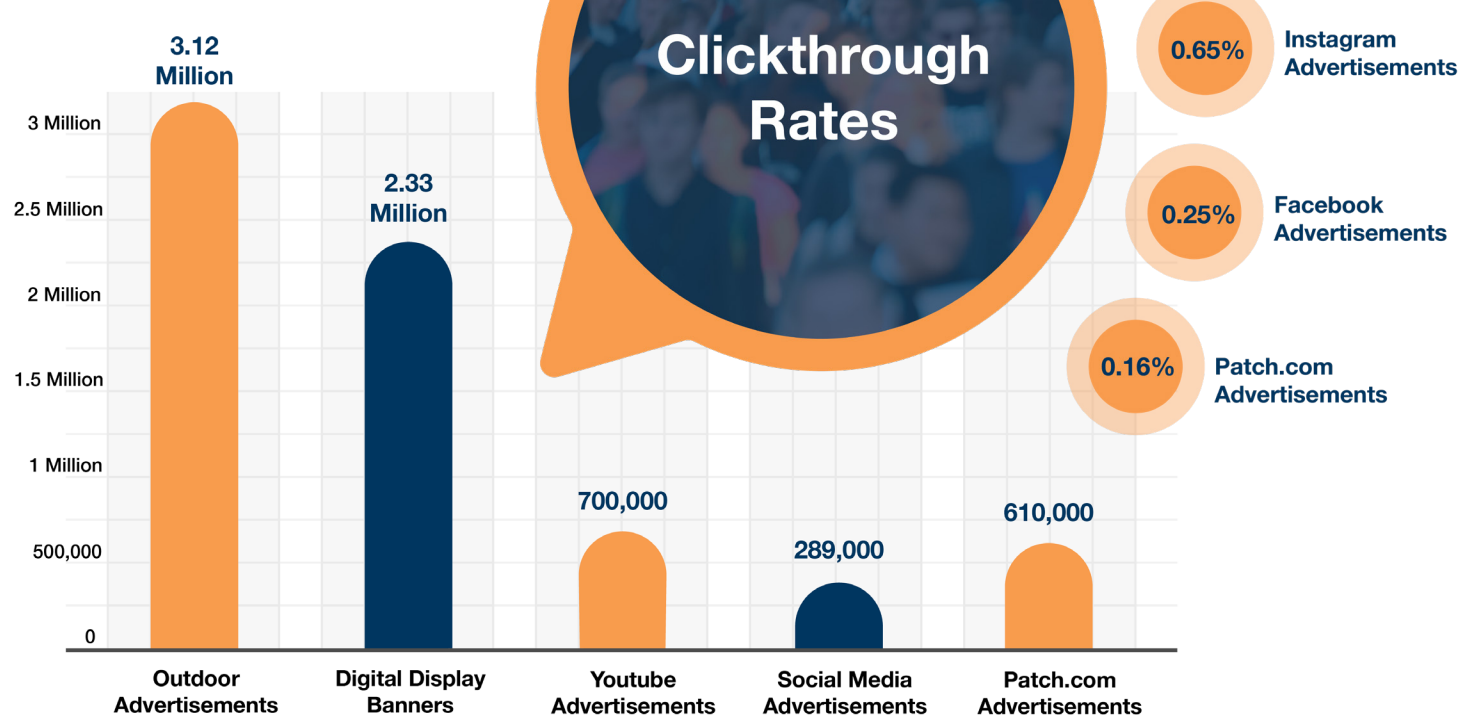
Fair Transit South Cook Looking Forward

Having completed its second year, the Fair Transit South Cook pilot has helped residents with several million rides to work, school, church and other trips each year. The reduced fares have helped Metra rebuild ridership and provide a fast, reliable and affordable transportation option for the southland.

OVER 6 MILLION IMPRESSIONS

By using multiple media channels with different creative approaches, the campaign generated over 6 million impressions, sufficient to reach the population in the target zip codes about six times during the campaign, and earning nearly 450,000 engagements (likes, shares, comments, or clicks).

Number of Impressions by Platform



During 2022, the transit agencies and County began developing a framework for a more integrated fare payment system that would allow riders to transfer between transit providers for less than the cost of an additional regular fare. At present, CTA and Pace accept the Ventra card and allow riders to transfer between their services at a discount. However, Metra does not use the Ventra card and a rider transferring between Metra and either CTA or Pace would need to purchase another regular fare. Other features of Metra's operation, such as visual inspection of tickets by conductors and platforms with no turnstiles, also make fare integration with CTA and Pace more challenging. However, there are ways to overcome these obstacles.

The Regional Connect Pass introduced in 2022 is an important step toward fare integration. However, a solution is still needed for customers who do not buy monthly passes.

The County looks forward to working in 2023 to define a path toward further fare integration and seamless transfers.

The Fair Transit South Cook pilot is targeted to an area of the County that has lower than average incomes and where the cost of Metra has led to residents taking slower travel options. Although they are more concentrated in south Cook, lower income households are found throughout the metropolitan area. Reducing fares for these riders would make transit more equitable. One way to do this is an income-based reduced fare program, which is used by 17 of the 50 largest transit agencies in the United States and holds promise for a more equitable fare structure in the Chicago area. The County plans to coordinate with transit agencies and other partners to investigate options for an income-based reduced fare program.

³Wesley Darling, Emily Carpenter, Tami Johnson-Praino, Candace Brakewood, and Carole Turley Voulgaris. Comparison of Reduced-Fare Programs for Low-Income Transit Riders. Transportation Research Record 2021, Vol. 2675(7) 335-349.sss

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