

City of Highland Park

Transit Study

December 2024

|||||



Acknowledgments

A special thank you to all the organizations, agencies, and community residents who helped provide feedback and shape the development of this study:

Collaborative Community Housing Initiative

Highland Park Public Library

Highland Park School District 113

Highland Park Senior Center

Highland Park Transportation Advisory Group

Josselyn Mental Health Center

Lake County Division of Transportation

Moraine Township

North Suburban Synagogue Beth El-Hazak Senior Life Committee

Pace Suburban Bus

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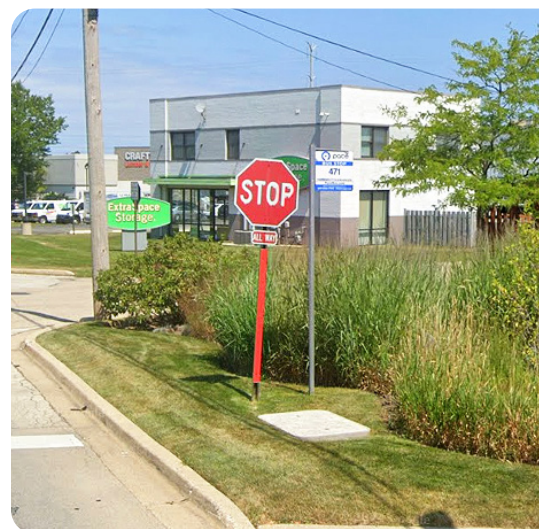
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Introduction

Study Goals and Purpose

The purpose of this study is to understand the public transportation needs of those who live, work, and visit Highland Park, identify gaps in current service, and develop recommendations that improve access and connectivity for all community members. This study will equip Highland Park with a framework so that it can better respond to the changing transportation needs of its residents.

The City of Highland Park has an extensive transportation network, including US-41, Metra stations, Pace bus routes, Highland Park Connector service, and on-street and off-street trails. This has been further enhanced by recent local plans and initiatives aiming to improve livability, access and connectivity throughout the City, such as the **Highland Park Master Plan** and **MoveHP**. This study will build upon the City's current transportation network to enhance equitable access for all community members to public transportation. A particular focus will be paid to transit-dependent populations within the community, such as youth, older adults, those with disabilities and low-income households, who may rely on public transportation as their primary mode of transportation.



Planning Considerations

This study builds on existing local and regional initiatives. Incorporating the plans of other municipalities and regional governing bodies can help ensure this study aligns with broader development goals regarding the transportation network. It is recognized that people do not begin and end all trips within Highland Park. Therefore, it is necessary to take into consideration regional plans and connectivity to ensure we meet the needs of all community members. Recently completed plans, along with ongoing studies, are included below. Some of these plans were developed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent shifts in remote work trends and changes to daily travel. This is taken into consideration in this study.

Local Plans

Highland Park Master Plan (1997)

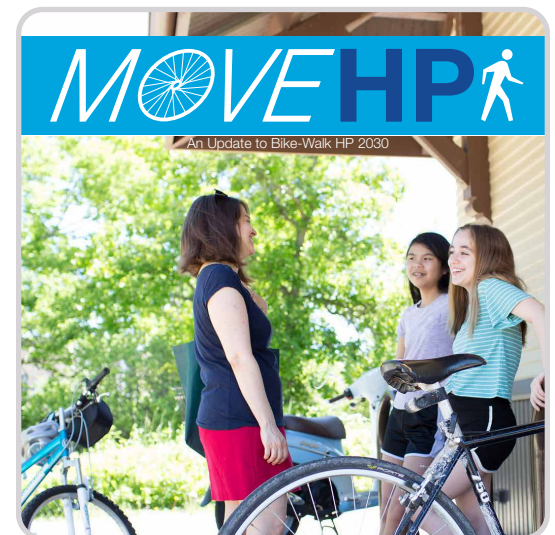
The City's **Comprehensive Master Plan**, which was most recently amended in 1997, established the community's values and principles to work toward a stronger community. It envisions the creation of a "more effective and efficient transportation system." Priorities of the Transportation principle include linking neighborhoods with schools, parks, and opens spaces, reducing Westside/Eastside separation, and providing non-vehicular connections.

Many of the goals and objectives of the Plan remain relevant. It seeks to provide a comprehensive transportation system that includes transit, motor vehicles, bicycles, and pedestrians, as well as to promote reduced dependence on cars. It also places importance on ensuring adequate public services are available to meet the needs of all residents throughout the community.

MoveHP (2020)

MoveHP focuses on the development of a comprehensive and connected non-motorized transportation system. It proposes that the City plan for improvements to the street and transportation system that will serve all users: cyclists, pedestrians, transit users and drivers, regardless of age or ability. The plan envisions improved, more enjoyable, and safer access to local and regional destinations. Key measures of this plan are sidewalk infill and bicycle facility improvements.

Some proposed improvements overlap with transit services, highlighting the complementary nature of the transportation system, particularly among active transportation users. It supports focusing pedestrian and bicycle improvements within a half-mile radius of Metra stations and bus routes. The proposed pedestrian infrastructure network includes new sidewalks and trails that connect directly to the Highwood Metra Station and along Pace routes on Park Avenue and Lake Cook Road. It also recommends working with regional transit agencies to promote and implement improved local mobility connections by providing secure bicycle storage at Metra Rail Stations and installing protected bus shelters along Pace routes.



Regional Plans

CMAP PART (2023)

The **Plan of Action for Regional Transit** consists of recommendations for transit improvements aimed at securing funding from legislative bodies. The plan envisions expanded service levels for transit, an integrated fares system for the region's transit agencies, and a more accessible system, among others. The plans highlights the critical role of transit in ensuring mobility, enhancing the economy, combating climate change, and fighting inequity.

RTA Strategic Plan (Transit is the Answer) (2023)

Transit is the Answer is the first strategic plan released by the Regional Transportation Authority after the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic. Changing travel habits and the agency's response are at the center of the plan. The plan highlights the importance of public transit, particularly its contribution to the economy, environmental benefits, and impacts on equity. This plan underscores the regional nature of transit, focusing on the importance of partnership between agencies and government entities. It proposes the adoption of new funding opportunities and advocacy items to ensure transportation network remains robust in the Chicago metropolitan region.

Pace Revision Plan (2025, expected)

Development of the **Pace ReVision** plan is currently underway and the full plan is expected to be released in 2025, with implementation anticipated for 2026. It is a comprehensive network restructuring project that envisions different funding scenarios to plan for future service changes. Preliminary network concepts were released in late 2024. While still under development, the network concepts provide insight into potential outcomes of the plan.

The network concepts center the relationship between ridership and coverage goals. The preliminary ridership concept is broadly focused on increasing frequency on high-ridership routes to increase the usefulness of transit to people by ensuring shorter wait times between buses. The coverage concept looks to ensure that as many people as possible have some access to transit service, even if frequency is low. This restructuring could bring significant changes to the existing network.

According to the network concepts report, the ridership concept could see the integration of the 471 and 472 routes. The proposed "260" route would have its eastern terminus at Highland Park Downtown, providing service west along Deerfield Road. Under the coverage concept, the existing routes would remain. These restructuring concepts are similar to other areas of Lake County and northern Cook County.



Lake County 2040 Plan (2014)

The **Lake County 2040 Transportation Plan** is the current long-range transportation plan for Lake County. The plan focuses on the greater transportation network and is broken down into three sections: roadways, transit, and non-motorized transportation. The transit section identifies the transit connections that are most important to the County, and serves as a guide for moving forward with advocating for improved transit services.

The plan includes a Transit Demand Index, a tool used by the Regional Transit Authority to gauge an area's potential demand for public transportation services. Many parts of Highland Park (downtown and adjacent neighborhoods) are rated as "medium" or "high." Overall, Highland Park exhibits higher transit demand index scores than other parts of Lake County. It also explores the demographic makeup of the county, and notes that Highland Park has a relatively high density of seniors compared to other communities.

It recommends a variety of traditional and novel transit improvements for future implementation, ranging from Metra service changes, establishment of multimodal transit hubs, and the creation of Call n Ride services throughout the county. In Highland Park, it includes transit projects that strengthen East-West connections and to neighboring communities. It proposes two separate improvements to enhance bus transit along the Lake-Cook Road and Route 22 corridors.



Existing Conditions

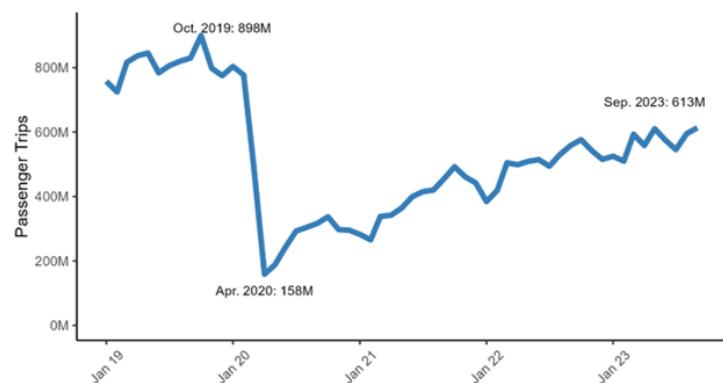
State of Transit

Across the country, ridership on public transportation decreased during the COVID-19 pandemic and, as of September 2023, has not recovered (FTA, 2024). This is further exacerbated by changing commuting habits, particularly more people working from home. Lower ridership has impacted necessary maintenance of public transit, and many agencies and cities are now facing funding issues as emergency federal assistance expires.

The Chicago Urbanized Area transit network is experiencing similar trends. As of September 2023, transit ridership is about 60% of pre-pandemic level, compared to a large, urbanized area national average of 71% (FTA, 2024). Changes in ridership vary between transit service. Pace Suburban Bus fixed-route service and Metra Rail have experienced the most pronounced decrease in unlinked passenger trips. While there has been a recent steady recovery, ridership still lags pre-pandemic totals. However, other services remain strong and have experienced expanded ridership. Ridership on Pace ADA Paratransit services has nearly recovered and has in several instances exceeded its monthly pre-pandemic levels.



Figure 1: Monthly Transit Ridership, All Modes, January 2019-September 2023



Source: National Transit Database

Pace ADA Paratransit Ridership by Month
January 2019 - September 2024

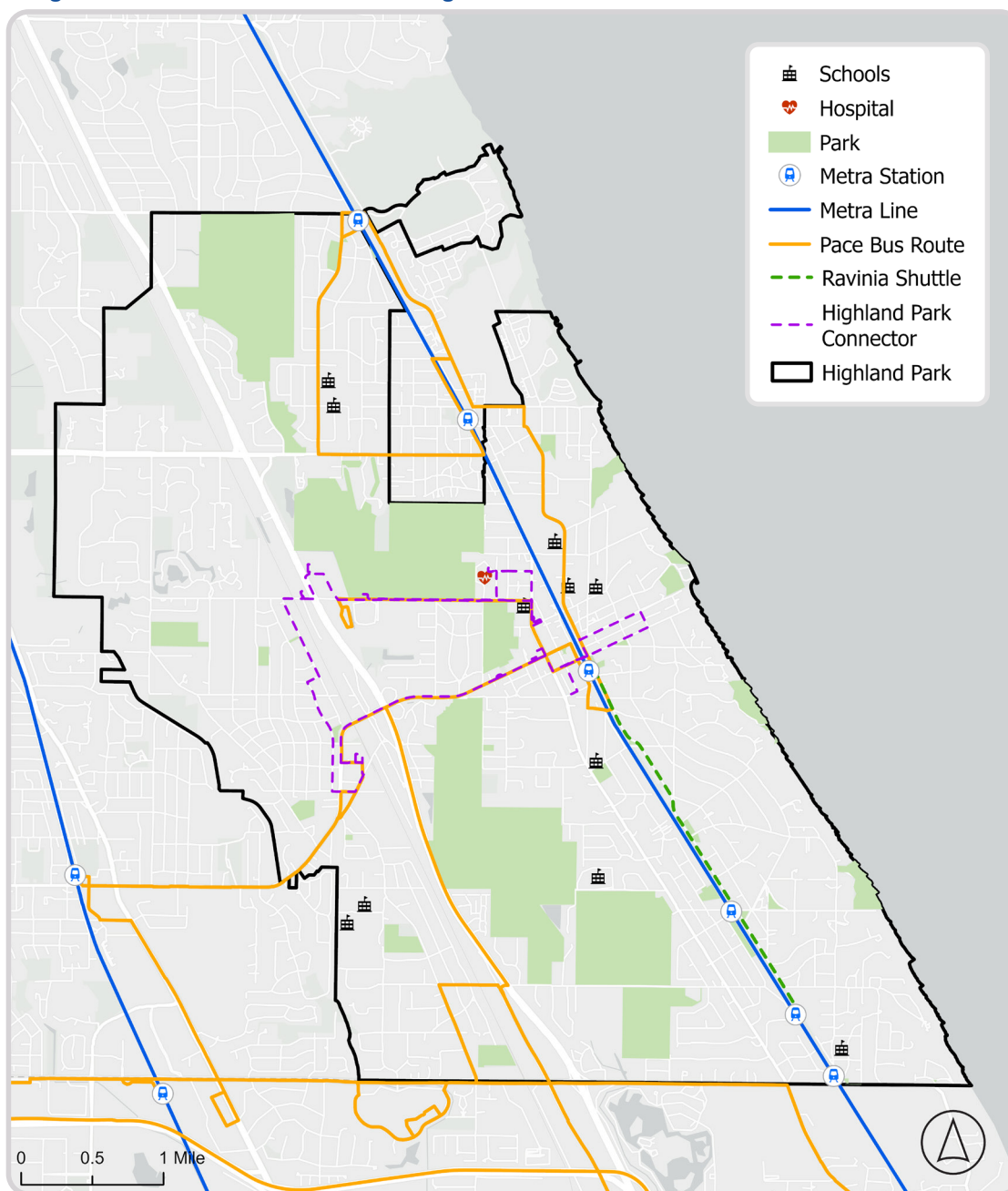


Existing Services

Highland Park Transit Services

A number of transit services and programs are available to Highland Park residents and visitors. Options include commuter rail, bus service, and on-demand transit services, see **Figure 1** below. These transit options can be grouped into two service types: fixed-route and demand response. These two types of transit service address different community needs. This study is primarily focused on fixed-route bus/shuttle and demand response services. We are not reviewing specific service recommendations for Metra, but include measures aimed at enhancing connectivity to Metra rail stations.

Figure 1. Fixed-Route Services in Highland Park



Fixed-Route

This is the most well-known type of public transportation. It operates on a set schedule and has distinct stops or stations. It generally has a high-ridership capacity, providing wide coverage and a level of reliability – users know what to expect with a set schedule. Fixed-route service also tends to be more cost-effective compared to demand response service and tends to have a lesser impact on the environment, as it reduces individual car trips, congestion and parking needs. While fixed-route transit has many benefits, it offers limited flexibility and can be inaccessible for certain populations, particularly for older adults and people with disabilities. Highland Park fixed-route transit services are summarized in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Highland Park Fixed-Route Transit

	Pace Suburban Bus	Metra	Highland Park Connector	Ravinia Shuttle Service
Routes/Lines	471, 472, 213	UP-N, UP-NW	N/A	475
Primary Stops / Stations	Highland Park Metra Station, Deerfield Metra Station, Northbrook Court	UP-N Braeside, Ravinia, Ravinia Park, Highland Park, Highwood, Fort Sheridan UP-NW Deerfield, Lake Cook Road	Senior Center and Recreation Center, Jewel Osco, Sunset Foods, Highland Park Hospital, Target, Library	Highland Park Metra Station, Ravinia Park
Cost For User	\$2.25 - Cash \$2.00 - Ventra card	Varies	Free	Free
Users	General Public	General Public	Seniors (50+), People with Disabilities	General Public
Service Area	Inter-Suburban	Regional	Highland Park	Highland Park
Neighboring Communities Served	Northbrook, Highwood, Fort Sheridan, Deerfield	Multiple	None	None
Service Days	Weekdays, Saturday	Daily	Monday, Wednesday, Friday	Event Specific
Service Hours	Approx. 7am to 7pm	Approx. 4am to 12am (weekday)	9am to 3:30 pm	Event Specific
Frequency	Weekday, Saturday: 60 minutes	Weekday Peak: 30 minutes Off Peak: 60 minutes	Hourly	Event Specific

Demand Response

Demand response services are “on-call” services, where passengers request rides in advance, and vehicles are dispatched to pick up and drop off passengers at locations and times that suit their needs. These services operate in “service zones,” which are defined geographic areas of operation. These options are highly effective at expanding coverage in low-density areas where fixed-route service is unsustainable due to long distances between destinations, providing a convenient option for people who may be unable to drive. With these services reliability tends to suffer when demand outpaces availability. In general, they are more expensive for the operating agencies than a fixed-route service. Highland Park demand response services are summarized in **Table 2**.

Table 2. Highland Park Transit Demand Response Services

	Moraine Township Paratransit Van	Faith In Action	Ride Lake County	West Deerfield Door-to-Door Paratransit Van	Pace ADA Paratransit
Cost For User	\$4 each way \$2 each way for income-qualified residents	Free	\$2 each way under 5 miles \$4 each way between 5-10 miles \$6 - each way for trips over 10 miles	\$6 Round Trip \$4 One-way	\$2
Users	Seniors and People with Disabilities of Moraine Township	Seniors	Seniors (60+) and People with Disabilities	Seniors (65+) and People with Disabilities of West Deerfield Township	People with Disabilities
Service Area	Up to 15-miles from Township borders	Bannockburn, Buffalo Grove, Deerfield, Highland Park, Highwood, Knollwood, Lake Bluff, Lake Forest, Lincolnshire, Riverwoods	Lake County and Surrounding Area	West Deerfield Township +15 minute radius	CMAP area
Service Days	Weekdays	Unknown	Daily	Weekdays	Daily
Service Hours	8:30am to 4pm	Unknown	6am to 6pm	9am to 3:30pm	24 Hours
Information Available In	English	English, Spanish	English, Spanish	English	English, Spanish
Registration Required	Unknown	Unknown	Yes	Yes	Yes
Reservation Method	Phone	Phone	Phone, App	Phone	Phone, App

Highland Park Transit Trends

Trends in Highland Park mirror those at the regional and national level. The following pages detail the community’s changing travel habits.

Pace Fixed-Route Service

Pace Suburban Bus operates bus routes throughout suburban Chicago, serving more than 200 communities. The primary routes that serve Highland Park, 471 and 472, saw dramatic decreases in ridership from 2019 to 2023. Average monthly ridership over this time has fallen approximately 53%, despite modest return of ridership in the previous 3 years (see **Figures 2-4**). Highland Park also operated two Pace “Shuttle Bug” routes (628/629) that operated between Metra Stations and nearby employers, carrying approximately 23,000 passengers in 2019. All Shuttle Bug routes were discontinued during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in April 2020 with no plan to restore these services at any future date.

Figure 2. Average Monthly Ridership, Pace Routes 471 and 472

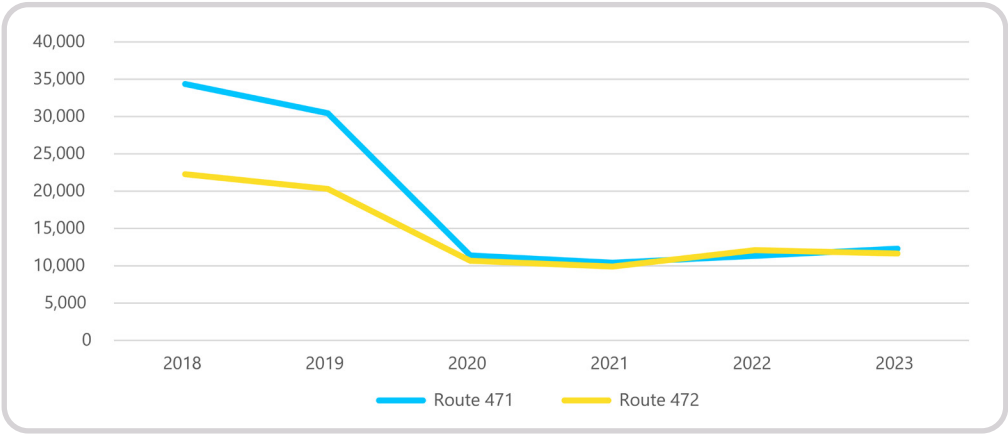
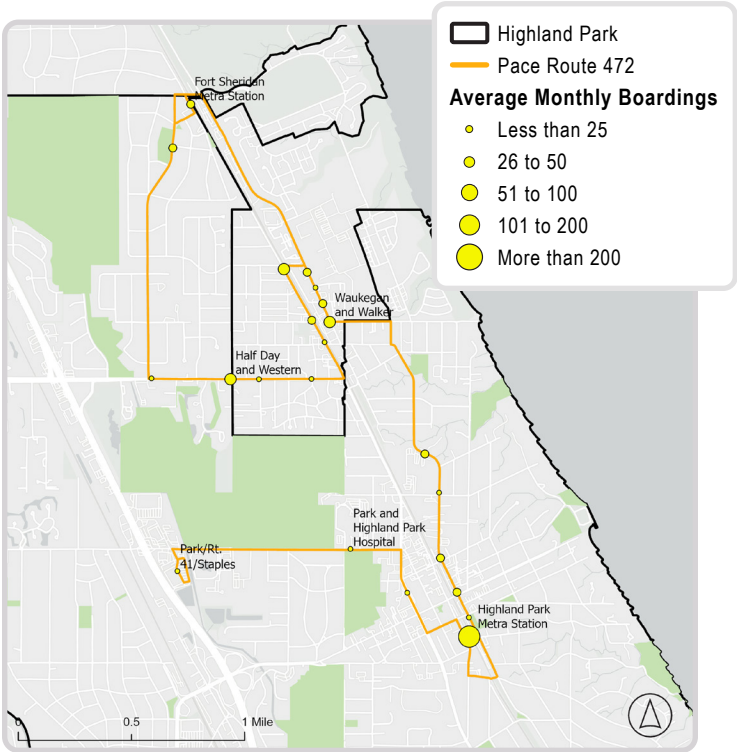


Figure 3. Ridership by Stop, Pace Route 471



Figure 4. Ridership by Stop, Pace Route 472



Metra

Highland Park is served by two Metra lines, the UP-N which runs directly through the City and the UP-NW, which has a stop in nearby Deerfield and is connected to Highland Park by the Pace 471 route. According to the most recent ridership report published in October 2024, Metra UP-N line ridership is 83% of its weekday ridership in October 2019.

Though still below pre-pandemic levels, ridership has recovered significantly from its lowest levels in 2020. Metra UP-NW has shown less significant recovery, with weekday ridership at 67% of its pre-pandemic level (see **Figure 5**). Metra recently implemented changes to service to increase ridership, including the option to bring bikes on board, a more streamlined fare structure, and updated service schedules.

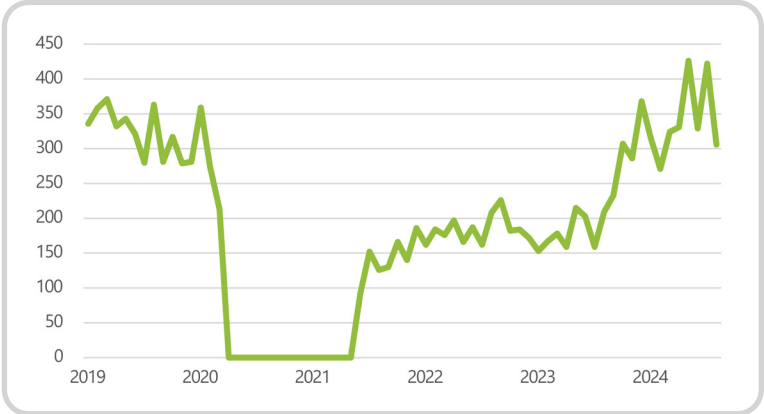
Figure 5. Metra Ridership Recovery (Oct 2024 as a % of Oct 2019)

Ridership Recovery by Line & Service Period (October 2024 as a percentage of October 2019)							
Line	Peak	Rev Peak	Midday	Evening	Weekday	Saturday	Sunday
BNSF	57%	67%	95%	90%	63%	101%	113%
HC	53%	-	-	-	50%	-	-
MD-N	58%	50%	74%	47%	58%	97%	85%
MD-W	47%	64%	79%	77%	52%	87%	90%
ME	41%	134%	97%	91%	57%	101%	88%
NCS	38%	30%	94%	-	41%	-	-
RI	47%	113%	80%	56%	51%	93%	80%
SWS	50%	65%	58%	26%	50%	-	-
UP-N	70%	95%	119%	115%	83%	110%	118%
UP-NW	60%	71%	99%	91%	67%	103%	97%
UP-W	66%	101%	88%	81%	71%	106%	108%
Total	56%	82%	94%	83%	63%	101%	101%

Highland Park Connector

The Highland Park Connector operates fixed-route service within the City of Highland Park to seniors and people with disabilities. Currently operating 3 days per week, it primarily serves senior living facilities, grocery stores, and other community destinations, providing free and accessible transportation. In contrast with other fixed route services, ridership on the Highland Park Connector has remained high since the pandemic. Despite operating fewer service days per week than before the pandemic, monthly average ridership has surpassed that before the pandemic. Projections for 2024 indicate total ridership is likely to outpace 2019 (**Figure 6**).

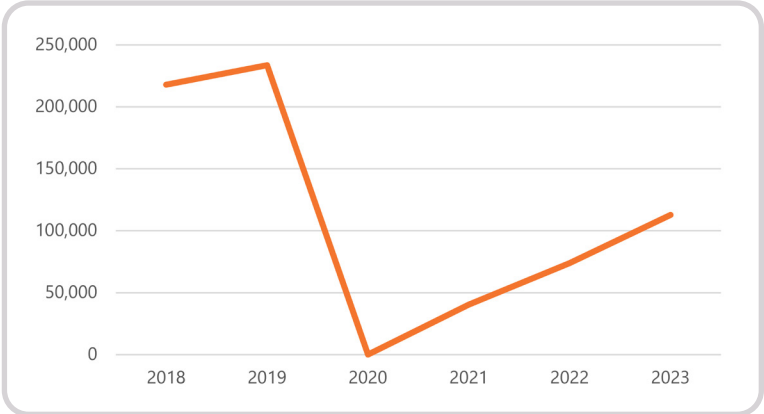
Figure 6. Average Monthly Ridership, Highland Park Connector (2019 to 2024)



Ravinia Shuttle

This is an event-specific service that provides free transportation for attendees of concerts at Ravinia Festival, which holds concerts and events seasonally. It runs between the grounds of Ravinia and the Highland Park Metra Station. It offers a convenient ride from the free parking lot to the festival. Ridership has varied over the years and is highly dependent the schedule of events. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, Ravinia Festival reduced maximum attendance thresholds, potentially impacting shuttle ridership. Ridership for the 2023 season was approximately half the 2019 total (**Figure 7**).

Figure 7. Average Yearly Ridership, Ravinia Shuttle Ridership (2018 - 2023)



Demand Response Services

While ridership figures for these services are more difficult to obtain, responses to surveys and questionnaires can provide evidence to the value of these services. According to questionnaire results from Moraine Township about its Transportation Van, riders are very pleased with the service. Comments indicate high levels of satisfaction regarding on-time performance, fares, scheduling, and professionalism of staff and drivers.

Surrounding Communities

Research of peer municipalities can provide an idea of what steps other communities with similar demographic characteristics are taking to better meet the transportation needs of their residents. Many similar communities offer unique services and programs that can be adopted within Highland Park. Deerfield and Northbrook both offer transit subsidy programs for seniors and people with disabilities. Communities and townships throughout the Chicago metropolitan area partner with Pace to operate dial-a-ride services for seniors and the disabled. Schaumburg runs a dial-a-ride service that is open to the general public.

Potential Transit Market

Highland Park is relatively well-connected by transit routes compared to neighboring communities. With that being said, understanding the community needs and potential transit market will provide insights as to whether existing transit options are meeting the current and future needs of those living and working in the City.

Community Context

Highland Park is home to a diverse group of residents with varying transportation needs. With the goal of improving mobility for all, it is useful to review demographic indicators that can help the City make decisions to improve mobility. For example, over 25% of Highland Park residents are over the age of 65, up from 15% in 2000 (CMAP, 2023). This is higher than Lake County and the entire Chicago Metropolitan area’s current proportion of 15% (CMAP, 2023). Demographic data for the City suggests an even further increasing

population of older adults in the coming years. **Figure 8**, released by the U.S. Census Bureau, shows that a significant cohort of residents will approach retirement age and beyond. Additionally, approximately 8.7% of Highland Park residents have at least one type of disability. Preparing for this demographic shift now can ensure that the future needs of the community can be met.

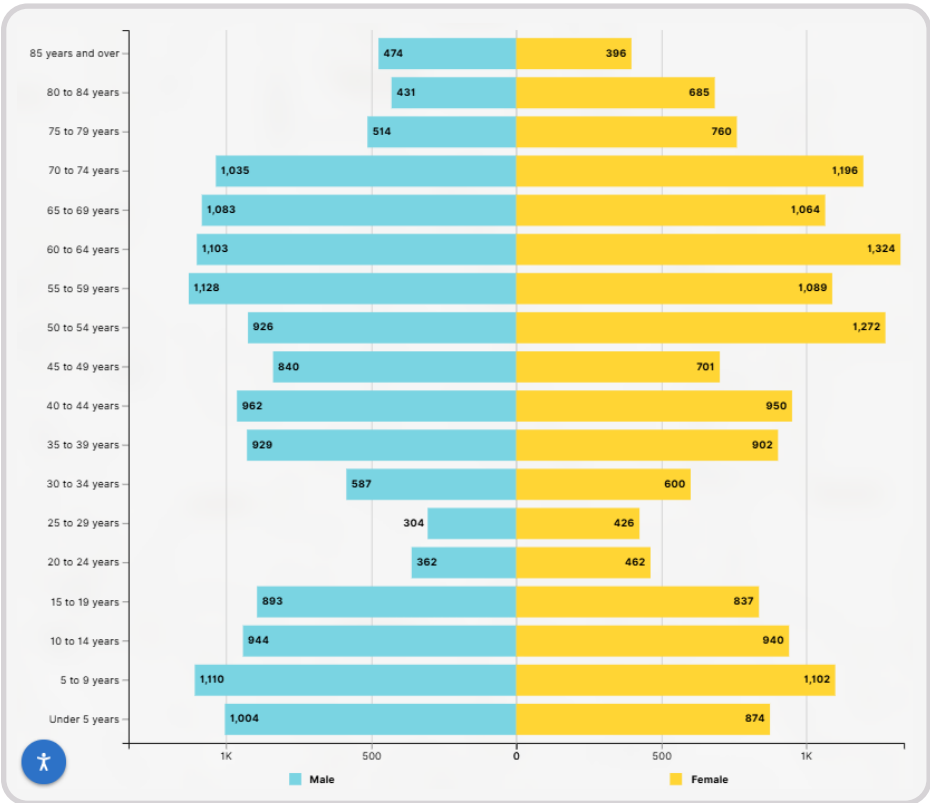


Figure 8 Highland Park Population Distribution by Age and Gender

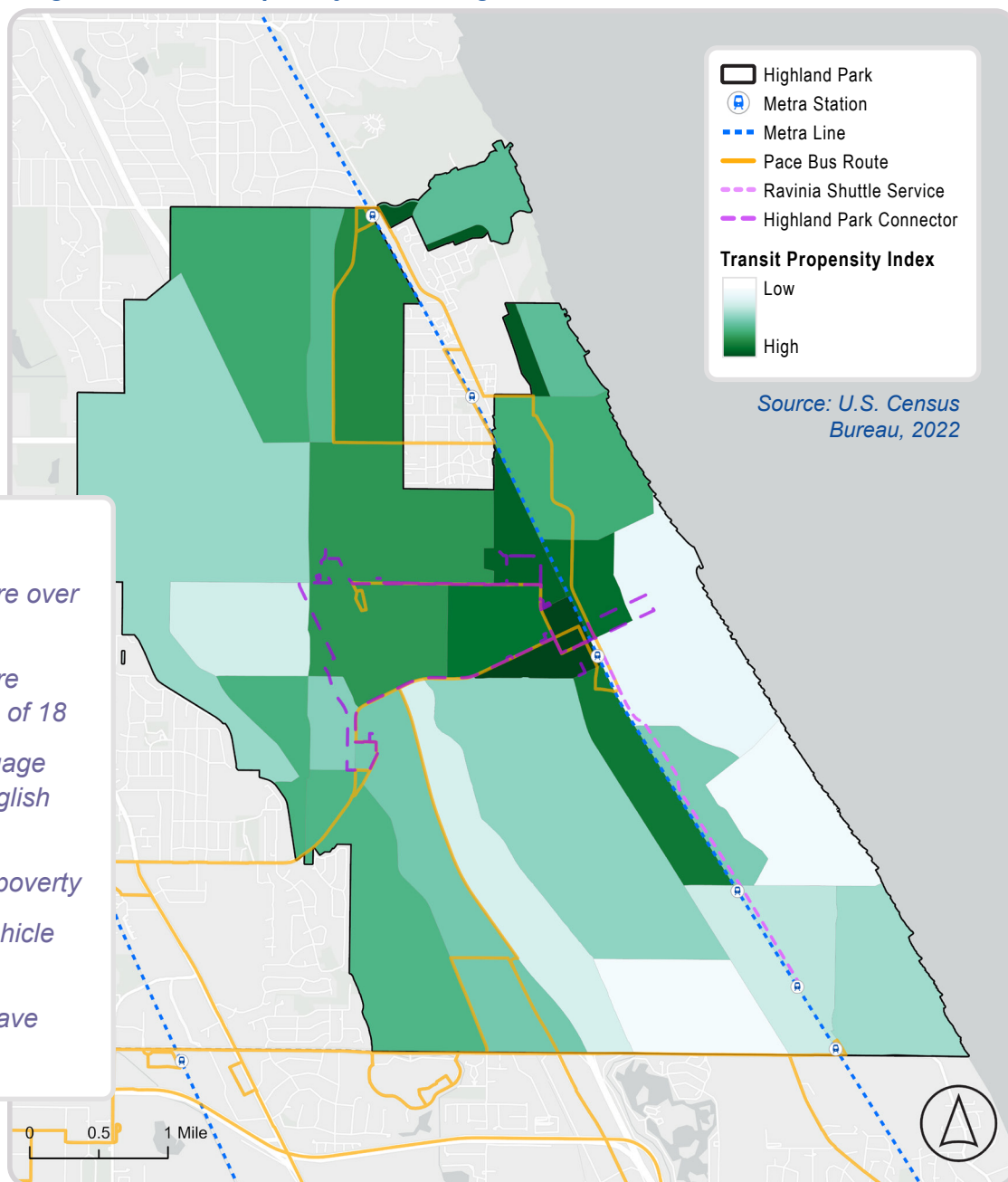
Transit-Propensity Index

The project team developed a Transit Propensity Index (see **Figure 9**) to identify areas of the community that may be more reliant on public transportation. This index is useful in determining potential alternate routes and expanding coverage of demand response services. Areas that scored more highly on the propensity index were also prioritized for survey mailings. The index shows the greatest transit propensity in downtown Highland Park and areas to the north.

Transit Propensity Index Criteria

- Population Density
- Age Under 18 Population
- Age Over 65 Population
- Households in Poverty
- Households without Access to a Vehicle
- Population with Limited English Ability
- Households with a Person with a Disability

Figure 9. Transit Propensity Index in Highland Park



In Highland Park...

25% of residents are over the age of 65

24% of residents are under the age of 18

16% speak a language other than English

3.4% of people are experiencing poverty

3.3% live in zero-vehicle households

8.8% of residents have a disability

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2022

Major Job and Employment Trends

Commuting habits have changed dramatically in recent years. **Table 3** shows the changes in means of commuting from 2019 to 2022. According to this data, nearly all means of commuting have seen decreases as remote work has become more widespread. As of 2022, transit use for commuting to work is down nearly 35% compared to 2019 and the share of residents working from home more than doubled.

Highland Park has a higher share of remote workers (22.3%) than the Chicago metropolitan region (14.1%). According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, remote workers are more likely to work in higher paying industries.

Despite these seemingly strong trends, these figures should not be used as evidence that demand for public transit no longer exists. The results of this survey were collected when the pandemic was more of a concern to the public, and workers were encouraged to stay at home. Recent developments suggest a resurgence of in-person work as employers require more in-office days. Recent studies indicate traffic congestion in the Chicago region is up 18% in 2024 from 2019 levels, suggesting workers returning to work have chosen to drive. With longer commute times, commuters may see transit as a more convenient option than driving a personal vehicle, leading to a mode shift toward public transit use.

Data surrounding jobs and commuting patterns provides insight into the flow of people into and out of Highland Park on a typical weekday. Analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data indicates significant inflow and outflow of people for work purposes. According to the 2021 data, only about 9% of workers in Highland Park reside in Highland Park, with approximately 91% coming from other communities, and nearly 2,000 low-wage workers (those earning \$1,250 per month or less) commute to Highland Park from other communities (see **Figure 10**).

Table 3. Commute Means in Highland Park

	2019	2022
Drove Alone	69.7%	62.8%
Carpool	5.6%	3.7%
Transit	12.9%	8.5%
Bike or Walk	1.0%	2.2%
Worked from Home	10.2%	22.3%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

Figure 10. Employment Flows for Highland Park

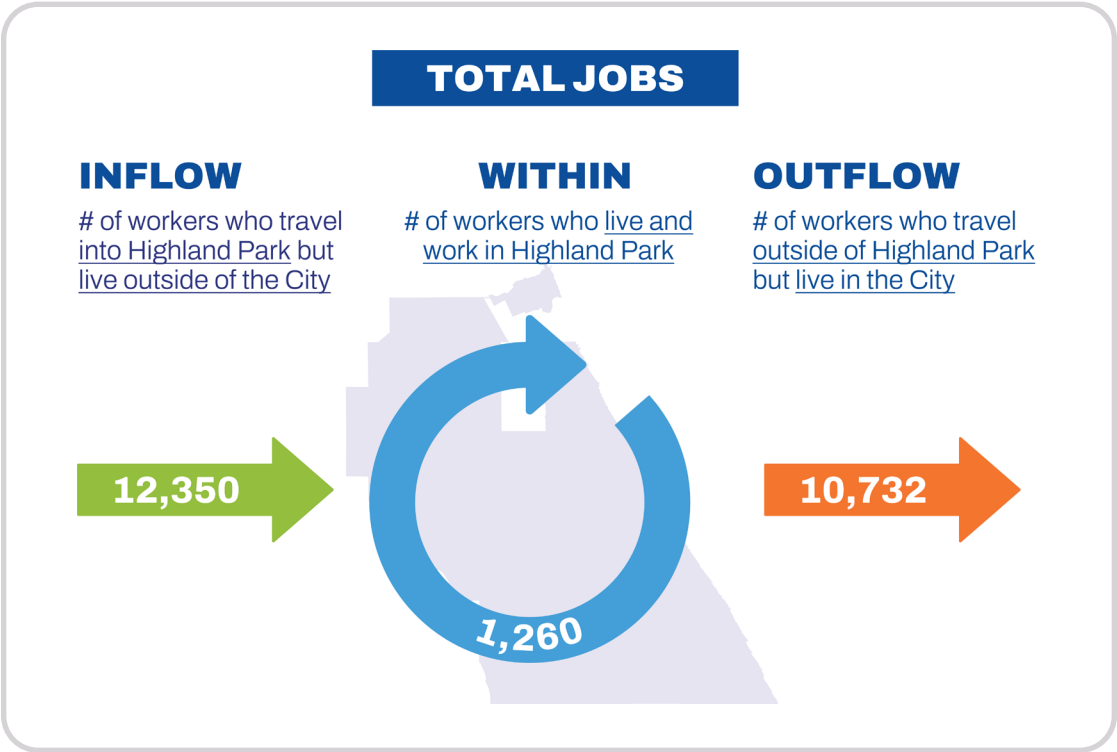


Table 4 compares the most common work destinations of Highland Park residents with the most common home communities of workers in Highland Park. Public transportation is an important option for this group of people. Most Highland Park residents work in other communities, with Chicago receiving the largest share of workers and Metra rail as an important means for commuters there.

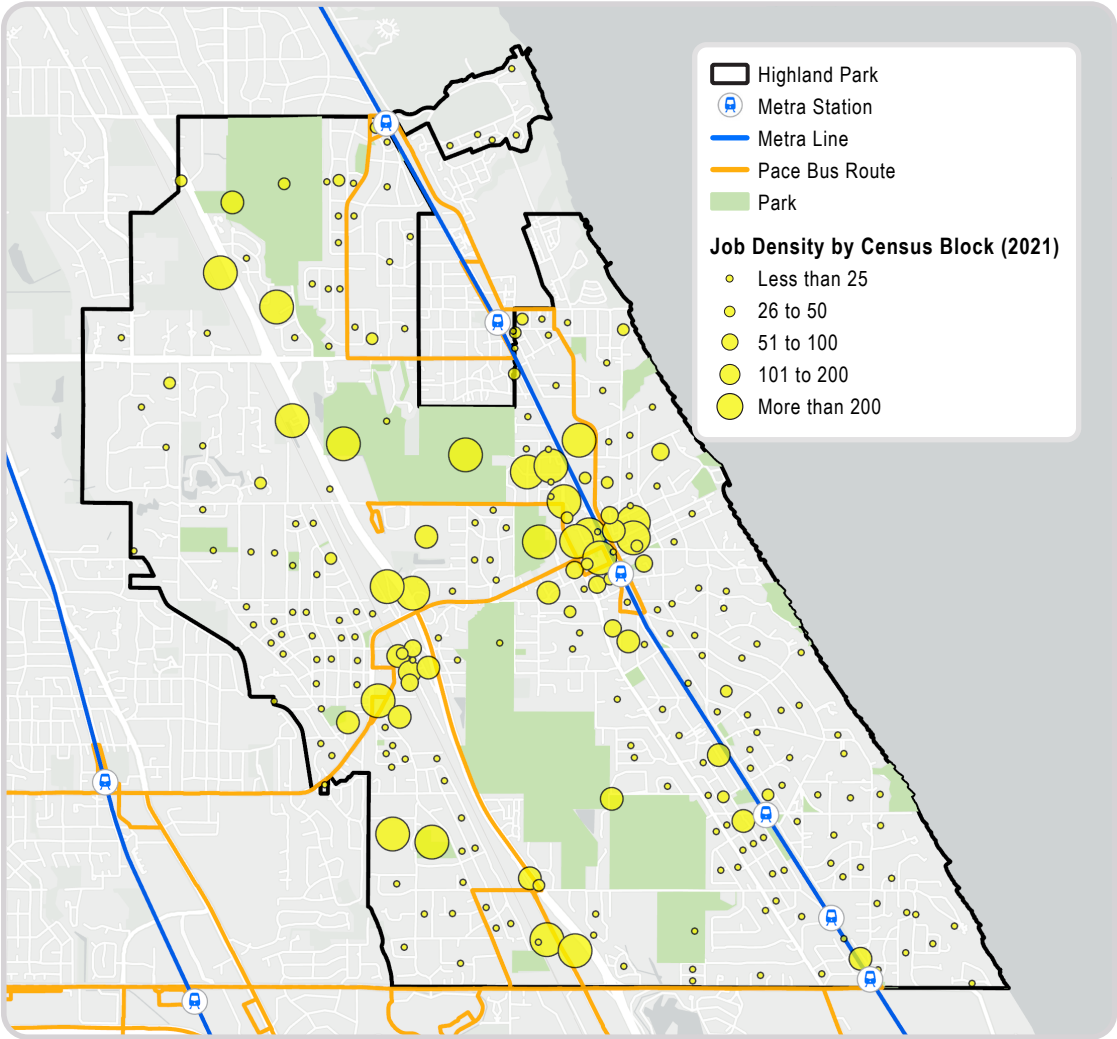
Figure 11 shows job density in Highland Park according to the 2021 LEHD data. Downtown Highland Park is home to the densest employment areas. This area is well served by public transportation routes. Other locations with high job density include the area near the Highland Park Hospital, retail areas along U.S. 41, Deerfield Road near Jewel-Osco, Sherwood and Red Oak Schools, and the commercial spaces at the intersection of Skokie Boulevard and Lake-Cook Road.

Table 4. Commute Locations for Highland Park

Where Workers in Highland Park Live (2021)			Where Highland Park Residents Work (2021)		
Chicago	1,912	14.0%	Chicago	3,079	25.7%
Highland Park	1,260	9.3%	Highland Park	1,260	10.5%
Waukegan	585	4.3%	Northbrook	651	5.4%
Skokie	348	2.6%	Deerfield	377	3.1%
Deerfield	335	2.5%	Evanston	315	2.6%
Northbrook	323	2.4%	Glenview	237	2.0%
Evanston	314	2.3%	Lake Forest	226	1.9%
Glenview	314	2.3%	Skokie	224	1.9%
Buffalo Grove	266	2.0%	Waukegan	196	1.6%
Highwood	236	1.7%	Schaumburg	166	1.4%
Other Locations	7,717	56.7%	Other Locations	5,261	43.9%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

Figure 11. Job Density in Highland Park



Community Engagement

Outreach Overview

This study aims to better understand public transportation needs, identify gaps in service, and develop recommendations that will improve access and connectivity in Highland Park. Meaningful public participation is central to meeting these goals, and close collaboration with the community ensures that their priorities are reflected in the recommendations of this study.

The project team received valuable input from the public through multiple channels, including a survey, in-person pop-up event, and three focus group sessions with local representatives. City staff and the citizen-led Transportation Advisory Group shared important feedback that helped guide the final steps of the study process. Input and feedback obtained through community engagement events was vital in forming the transit network recommendations and evaluation criteria.



Outreach Activities

Survey

The project team developed and distributed a public survey which was open from August to November 2024. It asked respondents about transit use, general travel habits and preferences, and opportunities for improvement. The survey was promoted through flyers at public locations, City eNews, The Highlander, and postcard mailings. It was available in four languages: English, Spanish, Russian, and Polish.

We Want To Hear From You!
¡Queremos saber su opinión!

Please complete a survey for the Highland Park Transit Study to help improve transportation options within and around Highland Park.
Por favor, complete una encuesta para el Estudio de Transporte Público de Highland Park con el fin de mejorar las opciones de transporte público dentro y alrededor de Highland Park.

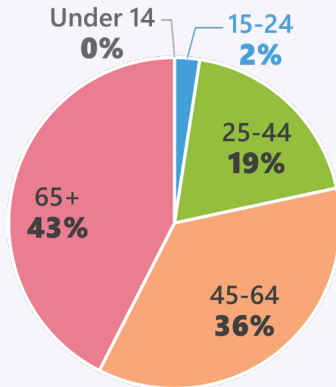
TAKE THE SURVEY TODAY! **¡Complete la encuesta hoy!**
 Open through August 30, 2024 Disponible hasta el 30 de agosto de 2024
tinyurl.com/HPTransitStudy tinyurl.com/HPTransitStudy

Postcard sent to residents to promote the survey

Of the 379 survey respondents, 93% live in Highland Park, while the rest work, visit, or travel through the City. There was a high response rate among older adults, with 42% of respondents reporting they were 65+.

Survey Responses: 379

Age of Respondents

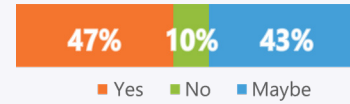


Are there specific destinations you would like to reach?

Top 5 Most Referenced

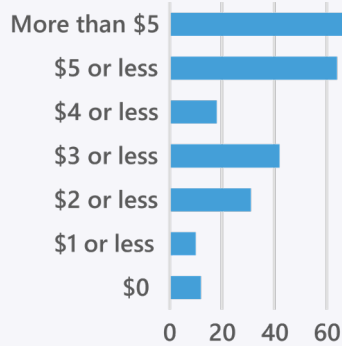
- Downtown Chicago
- O'Hare/Midway Airports
- Ravinia
- Local Malls/Attractions
- Highwood/Surrounding Areas

If improvements to public transportation were made to address barriers, would you use public transportation?

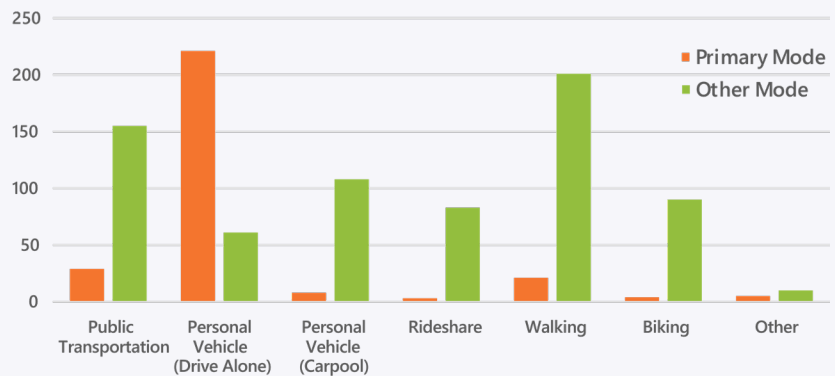


"Around town, I prefer to drive. Public transit isn't convenient enough to use it. However, to get into Chicago, I always take the Metra."

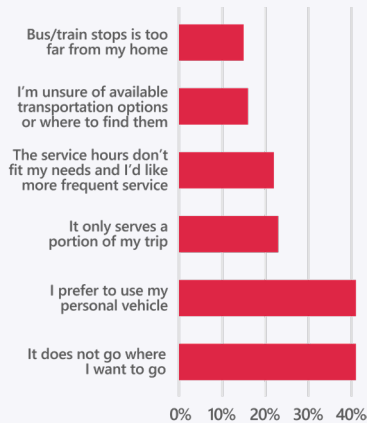
Willingness to spend to get to destinations with public transportation



Primary Mode of Transportation / Other Modes Utilized



Barriers to higher use of public transportation



Knowledge of available transit options

percent of respondents who...

		are unaware of this service	use this service at least a few times per year	are aware of this service but do not use it
Fixed-Route Transit	Pace Suburban Bus	10.4%	16.3%	73.3%
	Metra	4.8%	75.7%	19.1%
	Highland Park Connector	54.6%	3.2%	37.8%
Demand Response Service	Ride Lake County	71.3%	1.2%	22.3%
	Moraine Township Door-to-Door Transportation Van	45.8%	2.4%	49.0%
	West Deerfield Township Transportation Van	75.7%	0.4%	20.3%
	Faith in Action Transportation Service	82.9%	1.6%	11.6%

Key Takeaways

- While 77% of respondents drive a personal vehicle as their primary mode of transportation, ***nearly 54% reported using some form of public transportation.***
- Approximately ***20% of respondents reported being unable to go somewhere because they did not have a way to there.*** There was little difference among age groups.
- Most respondents are aware of fixed-route transit services (Pace 90%, Metra 95%, Highland Park Connector 43%), but there is ***generally a lower awareness for demand response services*** (Ride Lake County 24%, Moraine Township Door to Door Transportation Van 22%, West Deerfield Township 21%).
- General willingness to use public transportation if services better met needs. ***About 90% of respondents indicated they would be willing to use public transportation if barriers were addressed.***

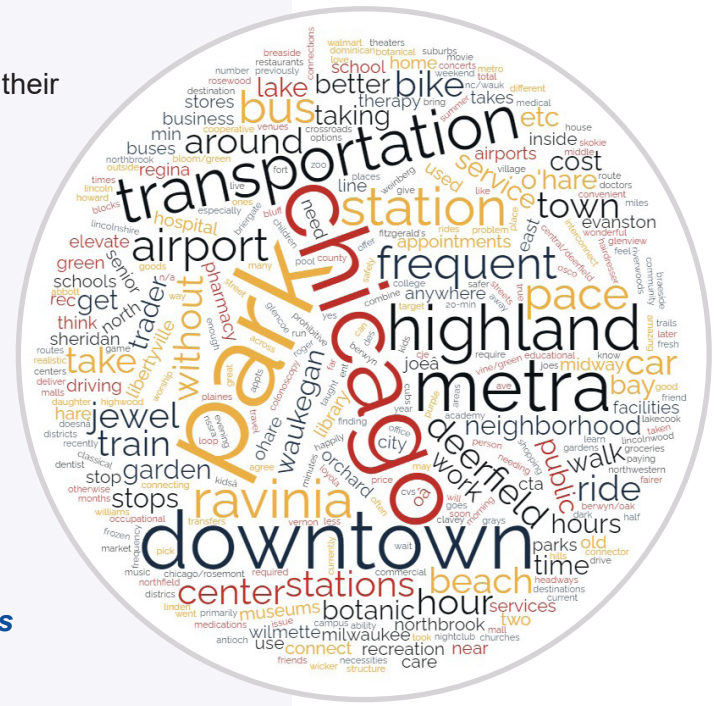
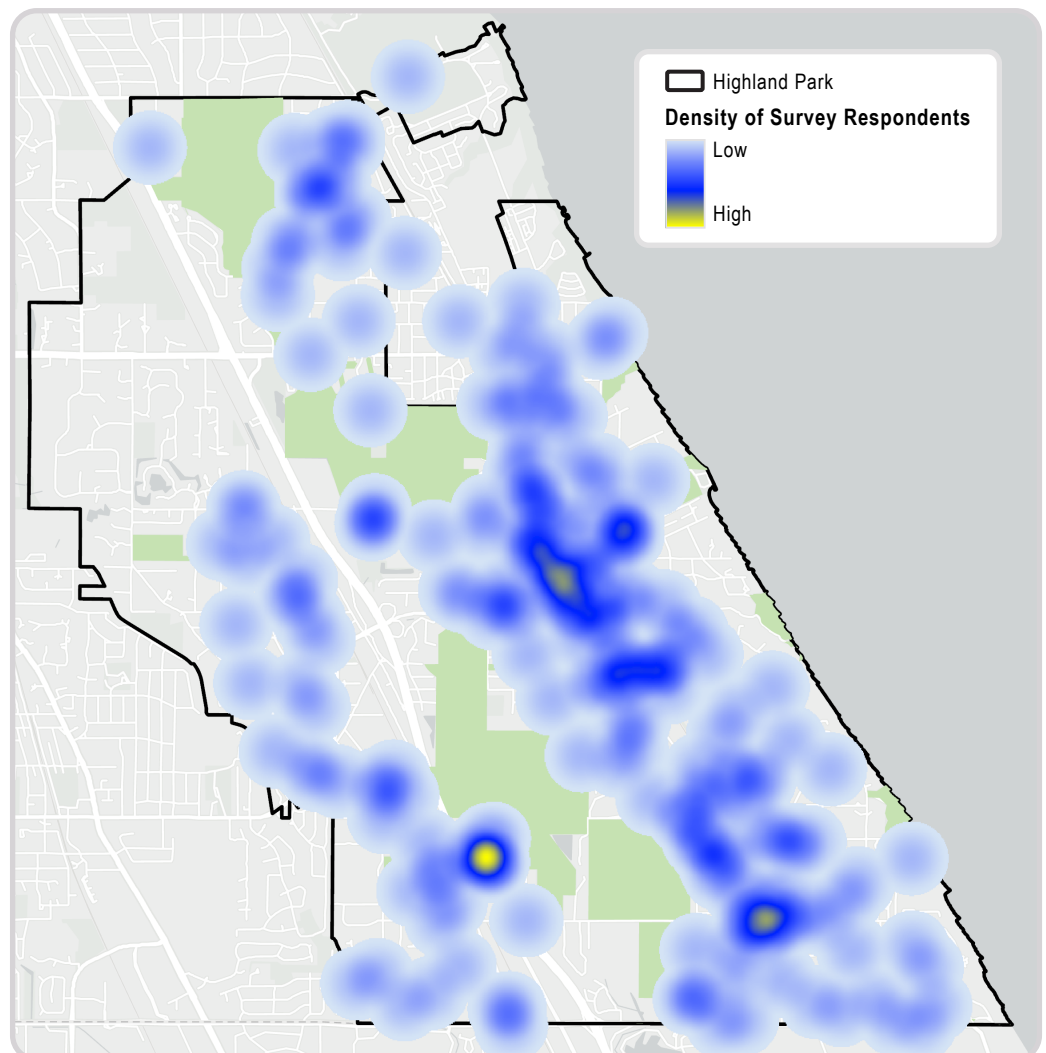


Figure 12. Location of Survey Respondents Heatmap

The project team visualized the geographic spread of survey responses based on information provided in the survey (by home address). **Figure 12** shows a heatmap of those survey respondents who provided a home address. There is a relatively large concentration of responses from Downtown Highland Park, Ravinia District, and the Chantilly Subdivision area. Overall, representation was greater on the east side of the community than the west side. These responses were consistent with community areas potentially having a greater transit-dependency population based on the Transit Propensity Index.



Focus Group Sessions

To hear from stakeholders most affected by changes to the transit system, focus group sessions were held with representatives from community organizations that represent transit-dependent populations. Representatives from these groups shared their insights on how the transit network serves their students, members and patrons, and how it can be reworked to better meet their needs. The organizations represented include:

- Schools and Public Library: Highland Park Public Library, Highland Park School District 113
- Healthcare Providers & Senior Citizen Organizations: Highland Park Senior Center, Josselyn Mental Health Center, North Suburban Synagogue Beth El-Hazak Senior Life Committee
- Individuals with Disabilities: Collaborative Community Housing Initiative

Key Takeaways

- Participants expressed a **general appreciation for this discussion and study, the emphasis on inclusion, and current transportation options in the City.**
- There is a **lack of awareness of all public transportation options** amongst community members.
- Current service hours and days **do not serve the diverse needs of all potential riders.**
- Demand response service is **valuable, especially for older adults and people with disabilities**, but it **suffers from resource constraints, service availability, and concerns about reliability.**
- For older adults and for those that cannot utilize electronic payment methods, **technology is a barrier.**
- There is a **willingness to utilize public transportation if services were improved.**

Pop-Up Meeting

In August 2024 the project team held a pop-up event at Ravinia District Food Truck Thursday to meet with residents and promote the public survey. The project team spoke with community members about the goals of the transit study and received feedback on the existing transportation system in Highland Park.



Stakeholder Meetings

The City convened the first of three Government Partners Group Meetings in April 2024 to facilitate a discussion and initiate communication between transit agencies and the project team. The City presented an overview of the study and its goals and objectives. Attendees of these meetings included representatives from Pace, Moraine Township, and Lake County. The project team developed an initial data request for information on existing transit services, facilities, and ridership feedback. Partners provided existing conditions data regarding their services, surveys they had distributed internally, and feedback about the existing transit need in the City and the region.

The project team presented an overview of this study and initial findings to the Highland Park Transportation Advisory Group on September 24, 2024. The Group had the opportunity to weigh in on the progress and direction of the study. The feedback from this presentation helped guide the final steps in the project development process and shape some of the proposed improvement recommendations. The Partners assisted in distributing the public survey and participated in discussions about potential improvement opportunities.

Overall Takeaways

Input received through the study directly informed the development of recommended improvements and their evaluation criteria. While community feedback touched on many aspects of the transit network, several overarching themes were heard from comments and survey results. These included:

Appreciation for Transit: Community members appreciate the important role transit services and the City's dedication to improving them.

Awareness of Demand Response Services: There is low awareness of existing demand response services, particularly those operated by Moraine Township, Deerfield Township, and Faith in Action.

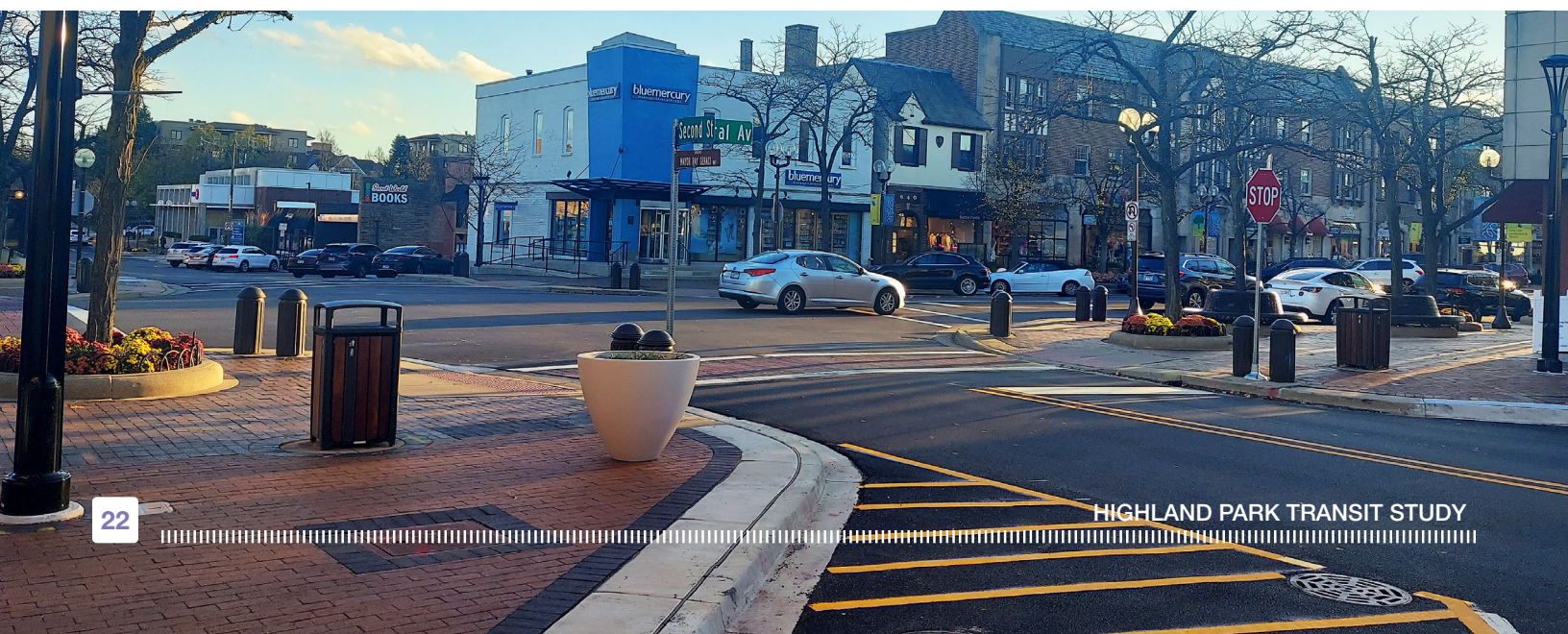
Availability Constraints of Demand Response Services: While there are several services aimed at serving older adults and people with disabilities, they often suffer from a lack of availability. Additionally, medical trips are often prioritized, and trips for other purposes often cannot be confirmed with advance notice, making it difficult for potential riders to plan and schedule appointments, social activities, and other trips.

Service Coverage and Connection to Key Destinations: Community members frequently mentioned being unable to travel places where they need to go on transit, or only being able to fulfill part of an entire trip.

Service Frequency: Community members noted the lack of service frequency on fixed-route systems as a deterrent to transit use. This means that riders need to schedule their trips around the next available bus or train, resulting in wait times that may be prohibitive and incentivize driving a personal vehicle.

Willing to Pay: Overall, residents expressed a willingness to pay for public transportation options. Only 5% of respondents indicated they would be completely unwilling to pay to use public transportation. 53% of respondents are willing to pay up to \$5 for a ride.

Feedback from these outreach strategies helped contextualize the experience of current and potential users of the transit network. Incorporating the perspective of the community is essential for ensuring that the recommendations reflect the needs, preferences, and concerns of the people who will use the transit system. In this study, these findings were important factors in determining the subsequent improvement recommendations and evaluation criteria.



Recommendations

Potential Improvements

Analysis of existing services, potential transit markets, community feedback, and input from the City informed the recommendations that were developed as part of this study. The following sections provide a summary of each recommendation and how each align with the selection criteria. Recommendations are not listed in order of preference.



A Transit Awareness Campaign

This improvement seeks to establish an initiative that would develop comprehensive, easy-to-read materials and training of staff at public-facing institutions. Respondents to the public survey and comments received indicate that potential riders are unaware of existing services and how to easily access information on routing, scheduling, and coverage. These materials would provide information on services, schedules, fares, and destinations.

The City would coordinate with institutions and relevant stakeholder groups to distribute materials and train staff on the available transit services. During focus group sessions conducted as part of this study's community engagement efforts, representatives from the Highland Park Public Library expressed a willingness to establish an informational center within the library, which would serve as point of reference for potential transit users. This program would establish a transit center at the public library and eventually expand to other community centers such as senior-living facilities.

Potential Awareness Campaign

Step 1. Develop Transit Materials: Create a website and brochure with comprehensive transit options, both fixed-route and demand response, include a City phone number and contact person for any questions.

Step 2: Develop Campaign: Establish a plan for spreading awareness about transit options, potentially a 2 to 5 month campaign throughout the summer and fall. This could include an "on the road" component, bringing a presentation to schools, senior center, pop-up table at outdoor events, as well as placing posters and leaving stacks of brochures at locations throughout the City.

Step 3: Develop Promotional Materials: Utilize the new Transit branding and develop presentation for "on the road" show; design a poster; design car cards to place inside buses, shuttles, and transit stations as appropriate; create a transit quiz for kids; and create "swag" as giveaways (ie: keychains, toy buses, magnets).

Step 4: Engage the Community: Deploy the campaign! And establish a transit information center at the library.

B Pace Routing Changes

Minor route changes are routinely implemented by Pace Suburban Bus quarterly. The existing routes that serve Highland Park are important for those that rely on them, but have low ridership. Routes 471 and 472 largely cover the most transit-dependent areas of the City. However, the existing routes could be improved with ongoing reevaluation of performance. This improvement seeks to modify Pace bus service by implementing minor changes to the existing Pace 471 and 472 routes. Pace considers feedback from municipalities when considering routing changes. The City should work with Pace to determine which routing changes are necessary and feasible. The results of this study can be used to address potential routing changes to Highland Park routes.

Routing changes are intended to be small and incremental. Route modifications would include eliminating service to low-ridership stops and prioritizing service to high-density areas and destinations with more trip-generating potential. For example, the U.S. 41/Park Ave. stop along route 472 could be eliminated and the route altered to serve Highland Park Hospital and its westernmost extent, and establish a connecting, circular pattern along Green Bay Road. Further investigation into recent land use changes and commuting patterns can help determine other routing changes.



C Pace Service Changes

Public input highlights a lack of frequency as a key deterrent from public transit use. This was noted as a larger barrier than service hours (requesting earlier or later service). A long-term improvement would be to improve service frequency and hours to make bus service more attractive to potential riders. With current scheduling (hourly service), riders must time their trips to the fixed-route schedule to avoid extended wait times. This makes it difficult to rely on public transportation, particularly for time-sensitive trips such as to work and appointments.

This was noted as a priority during focus groups for those who utilize Pace to access Metra stations/other transit hubs for work, and those who would like to use Pace service but work non-traditional hours. This was particularly relevant to those who access the Police Department and future Collaborative Community Housing Initiative site and would utilize Route 471 if more frequent and had extended hours. Current frequency is approximately every 60 minutes. The City would work with Pace to increase service frequency and hours on existing routes. This would likely be subject to Pace funding and the outcomes of upcoming changes as part of Pace's ReVision initiative.



D Taxi or Rideshare Subsidy Program

This improvement creates a pilot program that subsidizes private rideshare or taxi rides for individuals. These programs are typically geared toward seniors and people with disabilities. While these groups are currently served by demand response services, demand often supersedes the capacity of these services and potential riders are unable to utilize the service. During community outreach, residents cited low availability, prioritization of medical appointments, and limited destinations (small service area) as constraints of existing options.

Similar programs have been implemented in neighboring communities, including Northbrook, Deerfield, and Schaumburg. In these programs, residents register with the City and receive a number of vouchers at a set amount to subsidize the cost of their taxi fare. Agreements are established with taxi or rideshare companies to accept this payment method. Vouchers are either sent in paper form, or credited to a reusable card which participants can use to pay in the vehicle. Participants are responsible for booking their own trips and for payment of the remaining amount and any gratuity for the driver. This program provides extensive service coverage and flexible scheduling that is not possible with traditional public transit options. It is highly effective for targeting transit-dependent populations.

In determining the structure of this program and potential service providers, consideration should be given to the population this program looks to prioritize. Older adults are generally less technologically capable of using smartphone applications like Uber and Lyft. Stakeholder input suggests there is a general preference for bookings by telephone. Additionally, taxi drivers from an established company may be perceived as more professional and able to handle their specific needs. As the population ages, these concerns may become less of an issue.

E Alternate Highland Park Connector Route

The Highland Park Connector has been a successful transit option for seniors and people with disabilities. During community engagement, stakeholder representatives suggested that some residents are unable to access the Connector due to current routing and that riders desire more destinations.



By establishing an alternate route, the Connector can expand its service coverage to new potential riders and serve a wider range of community destinations not currently served by the Connector. This change could be implemented as fully alternating service days, or simply as a once-weekly route that caters to different riders and destinations.

Community feedback suggests older adults desire more options for everyday errands and social activities. These trips may contribute to positive quality of life changes for this group. Working with Senior Centers and stakeholder groups could help the City identify desired destinations and develop a potential alternate route. Potential new destinations include Northbrook Court, Chantilly, and Highwood Downtown.

The City could consider options for generating revenue to help fund existing or expanded future service, such as the implementation of a modest fare paid directly by riders or partial funding from senior centers and other facilities served by the Connector.



F Downtown / Ravinia Circulator

Run seasonal (weather-permitting) bus or trolley-type service around the downtown area streets (St. Johns Avenue, Green Bay Road, 1st Street) that connect with the Ravinia business district. The downtown area, though relatively small, has the highest concentration of jobs and trip-generating destinations. This service would allow patrons and nearby residents to more easily visit Downtown Highland Park without the need for a personal vehicle and may expand opportunities for those that are mobile, but not able to walk long distances.

This service enables shoppers, visitors, and workers to access the downtown district, contributing to economic activity and reducing traffic and the need for parking. This route should be short and circular, providing adequate frequency without the need for multiple vehicles. The additional service would provide a placemaking opportunity and may support local small businesses. The City could consider working with the Highland Park Chamber of Commerce to fund and implement this service.



G Dial-a-Ride Service

Partner with Pace Suburban Bus to implement a custom-designed demand response service. The City should work closely with the community, City staff, and Pace to determine and establish rules on fares, geographic boundaries of service area, and passenger eligibility. Many similar services, though not all, require registration or limit eligibility to seniors and people with disabilities and establish a fare structure based on need. Data and information formulated from this study can be used to determine these factors. It is recommended that the City involve the public to the greatest extent possible when determining specific characteristics of the service.

A number of communities and townships have adopted similar programs. These services are especially effective at targeting transit-dependent populations. Upon initial implementation, it is recommended to monitor service and ridership and modify service zones and eligibility requirements as appropriate. City staff could liaise with other municipalities for guidance on implementation.

Changes proposed in Pace's ReVision network restructuring concepts may create increased ridership potential for a dial-a-ride service in the future.



Source: Pace Suburban Bus

Evaluation Criteria

The project team utilized the initial goals of the transit study, as well as community feedback obtained through engagement efforts, to develop criteria for evaluating the potential transit improvements. Three criteria (Connection to Key Community Destinations, Service Frequency, and Transit Network Awareness) address the top barriers identified by survey respondents which prevent them from using public transportation. These criteria are intended to help the City prioritize projects and initiatives that will best serve the needs of current and potential transit users with the available resources.

In **Table 5**, evaluation criteria are ranked low, medium, or high. These ratings represent a scale of how well the recommendation meets the evaluation criterion relative to other recommendations of this study. A score of “high” indicates the recommendation best meets the criterion compared to others, “medium” meets the criterion as well as others, and score of “low” least fulfills the requirements of the criterion compared to the others.

Low Cost: The expected cost to the City to implement the recommendation. Providing recommendations to a partner agency, for example, is low-cost but the “ease of implementation” may be more challenging. Specific costs were not developed as part of this study. Rather, planning-level estimates and qualitative assessments were used.

Ease of Implementation: The level of ease or difficulty for the City to implement a recommendation. The fewer regulatory or institutional barriers that would prevent, prolong, or prohibit implementation, including coordination with transit agencies and other service providers, would lead to easier implementation. For example, City-led services and initiatives would be easier to implement than those requiring external coordination.

Improved Access for Transit-Dependent Populations: The level to which the improvement serves existing and potential riders that are most likely to rely on and use public transportation.

Connection to Key Community Destinations: The level to which the improvement provides, enhances, or reinforces a connection to community destinations including Highland Park Downtown, Highland Park Hospital, Northbrook Court, Highwood Downtown, Highland Park Senior Center, Schools (Highland Park High, Indian Trail, Sherwood, Braeside, Northwood, Red Oak, Wayne Thomas, Elm Place), and job centers along U.S. 41.

Enhanced Regional Connectivity: The level to which the improvement establishes or enhances connections to regional transit hubs, such as Northbrook Court or Deerfield Metra Station, or neighboring communities

Service Frequency: The level to which the improvement increases frequency of service to make transit more reliable, reduce wait times, improve feasibility of connections, and improve rider’s experience.

Transit Network Awareness: The level to which the improvement provides the public with complete and up-to-date information on services, routes, fares, and destinations in an accessible manner.

What is it?

Transit-Dependent Populations

People that are more likely to rely on public transportation, including seniors, people with disabilities, low-income households, and no vehicle households

For Highland Park: Identified in the Transit-Propensity Index

Key Community Destinations

Places that people need to access for work, education, health, and other necessary activities, such as job centers, schools, affordable housing complexes, senior centers, recreational facilities

For Highland Park: Identified through the public survey, focus groups, workforce/jobs review, and City guidance

Regional Connectivity

The ability of people to travel within a region, and between communities, by public transportation. Regional connectivity is enhanced with inter-modal transit hubs.

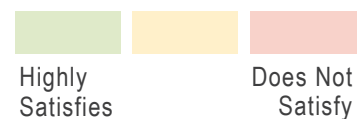
For Highland Park: Identified through the public survey, focus groups, workforce/jobs review, regional transportation network review, and City guidance

Table 5. Recommendation Evaluation Matrix

		Evaluation Criteria						
	Recommendation	Low Cost	Ease of Implementation	Improves Access for Transit-Dependent Populations	Connects to Key Destinations	Enhances Regional Connectivity	Improves Service Frequency	Transit Network Awareness
A	Transit Awareness Campaign	Green	Green	Yellow	Red	Red	Red	Green
B	Pace Routing Changes	Green	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Red	Yellow
C	Pace Service Changes	Green	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Green	Yellow
D	Taxi Subsidy Program	Yellow	Yellow	Green	Green	Green	Yellow	Red
E	Alternate Highland Park Connector Route	Yellow	Red	Yellow	Yellow	Red	Red	Yellow
F	Downtown Circulator	Red	Red	Red	Yellow	Red	Yellow	Yellow
G	Dial-a-Ride Service	Red	Red	Green	Green	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow

From our transit analysis and feedback from community engagement, it is clear there are varying and diverse needs, just as it is a diverse community. No recommendation can singlehandedly address all the issues of the existing public transportation network, therefore necessitating a wide range of improvements from incremental changes to existing services to implementation of new approaches. Each recommendation will ultimately address a “gap” in service, each playing its role in creating a stronger transportation system.

Recommendation Satisfies Evaluation Criteria



By addressing different gaps in service, these recommendations are likely to target specific populations while still enhancing the transportation system for all community members. For example, implementation of an Alternate Highland Park Connector Route or the Taxi/Rideshare Subsidy Program would be of most benefit to seniors and people with disabilities. Changes to fixed-route service may be most beneficial to commuters and residents who already use public transportation but would like greater flexibility. The Transit Awareness Campaign is intended to serve as a low-cost measure to provide an accessible point of reference to the public of the many options available for their specific needs.

Adoption of these recommendations should be considered through analysis of the desired outcomes for the City and its residents. It is recommended that the City promote public participation in its decision-making to ensure citizen support.

Additional Considerations

Continue discussions with key stakeholders to determine additional service offerings.

- School Districts: It was noted that buses do not serve those within 1.5 miles of the school. Therefore, determining the specific radius/service area and coordinating potential alternate transportation options could be further explored. Additionally, coordinating with high school Transition Services and reviewing potential transportation options, potentially including these individuals in the taxi subsidy program.
- Collaborative Community Housing Initiative: It was noted that CCHI is moving their facility near the Police Department, in west Highland Park. They noted that their residents and members often need transportation to downtown Highland Park for work or access to the Metra, along with destinations in surrounding municipalities. They often need transportation during non-traditional work hours as well. Further coordination with CCHI is recommended. Potential to seek partial funding agreement to provide service with Highland Park Connector.
- Coordinate with Transportation Advisory Group: To target concerns with the transit network, develop a volunteer subcommittee that is tasked with discussing public transportation. The committee could work with the entities the project team met with (and those that were invited to meet with), along with a call for interested parties during the Transit-Awareness Campaign.

Review and improve access to bus stops.

Conduct an inventory and assessment of bus stops throughout the City. Determine if bus stops have connectivity to sidewalks and crosswalks, and are ADA compliant. Additionally, review if there are bus pads, seating, shelters at the bus stops. Oftentimes, potential transit users do not consider bus transportation as an option if there is not a seat or protection from the weather, for vulnerable populations in particular. Increasing ADA compliance and creating a safe space to wait for the bus would improve access and security for potential riders. This also increases awareness of these services.



Next Steps

Implementation

The Highland Park Transit Study aims to improve access and transportation opportunities for all community members. Achieving this goal necessitates a multifaceted approach. Some recommendations will take time, funding, and further study. The City should work with the public to determine prioritization of improvements and establish its own timeframe based on community needs and feasibility. The findings of this study serve as a guide to implementation, not an adopted program. This section outlines potential prioritization and next steps for each recommendation.



Recommendation Prioritization

Recommendations are prioritized by the anticipated time needed for implementation. Those recommendations with low cost of implementation and minimal external coordination are included as short-term recommendations, while those higher costs and greater external coordination are medium and long-term recommendations. This list is intended to serve as an estimate of implementation time, not a binding schedule or improvement plan. Actual processes may take more or less time than outlined in this study. The anticipated length of time to implementation:



Short-Term Recommendations

Recommendation	Next Steps
Develop Transit-Awareness Campaign	Develop comprehensive transit materials, determine City partners, and outline awareness campaign
Provide Routing / Service Recommendations to Pace	Meet with Pace and provide recommendations for routing and service changes. Utilize the findings of this study to substantiate and provide support for proposed changes.
Continue Discussions with Key Stakeholders	Schedule meetings in 2025 with key stakeholders identified during the focus group discussions.

Medium-Term Recommendations

Recommendation	Next Steps
Develop and Launch Taxi/ Rideshare Subsidy Pilot	Discuss best practices and lessons learned with neighboring municipalities who have implemented this program. Determine funding availability, structure of subsidy, potential service partners, and eligibility requirements. Decide best method for delivery of voucher (physical vouchers, promo code, reloadable card, etc.)
Review, Develop and Launch Highland Park Connector Alternate Route (Pilot)	Coordinate with the Senior Center to confirm preferred route, destinations, and potential day(s) to offer alternate route. Solicit public input for routing changes. As funding is available, offering both routes on all weekdays would provide the most comprehensive transportation coverage for residents.
Explore Downtown Circulator	Work with partners in the community, including Ravinia Festival and the Highland Park Chamber of Commerce, to gauge interest in expanding Ravinia Shuttle Service or implementing a new downtown circulator route.
Establish Dial-a-Ride Service	Coordinate with Pace and seek guidance on funding requirements for implementation of a municipal Dial-a-Ride service. Determine service area, eligibility requirements, and fare to users.
Evaluate Taxi / Rideshare Subsidy Pilot	If successful, implement a permanent program.

Long-Term Recommendations

Recommendation	Next Steps
Evaluate Highland Park Connector Pilot Program	If successful, implement a permanent alternate route. Investigate impacts of implementing a fare to offset costs of expanded service.
Develop and Distribute a Transit Survey	To determine if new/updated transit programs are meeting the needs of the community, distribute a Citywide transit survey every 3-5 years.

Ongoing Recommendations

Recommendation	Next Steps
Monitor Regional Transit Goals from Regional Agencies (RTA, CMAP, Pace)	Consistently evaluate the City's transportation options/network to ensure alignment with long-term goals or new technologies.
Evaluate Community Changes	Work with other City departments to monitor new development projects, land use changes, and transit service performance.

Funding Opportunities

The City should consider applying for grant opportunities, either individually or in collaboration with transit agencies, to secure funding for improvements. Opportunities are available through grant programs from various government agencies and institutions. See **Table 6** for potentially relevant and current opportunities.

Table 6. Potential Funding Opportunities

Funding Program and Awarding Agency	Awarding Agency	Categories
Access to Transit	RTA	Pedestrian and Bicycle Facilities
Pilot Program for Enhanced Mobility	FTA	Accessibility, Public Transit
All Stations Accessibility Program (ASAP)	FTA	ADA, Public Transit
Reconnecting Communities Pilot Program	FHWA	Highway Barriers, Transit Line and Streetscape
Bus and Bus Facilities Competitive Grants	Federal Transit Administration	Bus Stops/Stations, Public Transit
Enhancing Mobility Innovation	Federal Highway Administration	Innovative Mobility, Software Solutions for Public Transit
Highway Safety Improvement Program	IDOT	Safety, Pedestrian Improvements
Illinois Transportation Enhancement Program	IDOT	Pedestrian and Bicycle Facilities
Surface Transportation Block Grant Program (STP)	CMAQ	Roads, Bridges / Major Projects, Infrastructure Projects, Transit Station Accessibility, Transit Stations, Transit Line and Streetscape



CONNECTING OUR COMMUNITY

