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## Critics say Metra's app no substitute for universal card



**Metra's got its own version of Ventra for smartphones, but some say that's not enough.**

*Courtesy of CTA*



**Marni Pyke**

After riders chided Metra for dropping the ball on a universal fare card Wednesday, leaders countered that they're offering the next-best thing and said piggybacking on the CTA and Pace's Ventra card is cost-prohibitive.

A 2011 state law required Metra, Pace and the CTA to provide a universal fare card allowing for easy travel between the three systems by Jan. 1, 2015.

Pace and the CTA complied with a fare card known as Ventra. Metra officials said they're meeting the mandate by providing a Ventra app for smartphones this fall that can be used to buy Metra tickets and display them to conductors on trains.

That's not good enough, said Chicagoan Linda Thisted. "The intent of the legislation was for a seamless transit system," Thisted said. The app "is not the real deal," she said.

She noted that seniors and low-income riders without smartphones aren't helped by the app. Metra Chairman Martin Oberman said there was a "misapprehension" the agency was falling short.

"We're committed to meeting the requirements of the legislation. We value all riders, including those that do not have smartphones," he said,

Metra officials have said they're hamstrung by having an "open system" where people board before showing proof they've paid. That's different from Pace and CTA, where people pay when entering stations or when they board buses.

Setting up turnstiles to check in Metra riders using Ventra cards would cost hundreds of millions of dollars, Executive Director Don Orseno said.

Likewise, developing technology for conductors to treat plastic Ventra cards as tickets or passes is also a multimillion-dollar proposition, officials said.

Metra ticket agents do accept Ventra cards for payment at stations if a debit card feature is activated.

In May, Illinois House Leader Barbara Flynn Currie rebuked Metra in a letter for not satisfying the intent of the legislation.

"Only 19 percent of seniors and 47 percent of people in households with annual incomes less than \$30,000 own smartphones," she wrote. "We would like Metra to thoroughly investigate the cost and timing of adopting the Ventra stored value card." Oberman said the meaning of "universal fare card" has never been defined.

"I'm not sure what they're asking that we're not doing," he said.

Eventually, the Ventra smartphone app will also work as a virtual ticket for access to Pace and CTA.

However, that feature applies only to phones with near field communications capability, which enables smartphones and other devices to establish radio communication with each other by being held close together.