

Metra defends smartphone app that will serve as virtual ticket

By **Richard Wronski**
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Metra officials on Wednesday defended the agency's plans to introduce a smartphone app that will allow customers to buy and display tickets on their phones using a Ventra account or a credit or debit card.

The mobile ticketing app, which Metra hopes to roll out this fall, is the commuter rail agency's long-awaited move toward minimizing paper tickets and passes.

The app also will enable customers to use their Apple or Android phones or mobile devices to pay for rides on all three Chicago-area transit systems, check account balances, and receive real-time travel and service information.

The app is "cutting edge," Metra Executive Director Don Orseno said. "This is a huge first step. This is the foundation" for the agency's future.

The free app is being developed along with the CTA and Pace, and Cubic Transportation Systems Inc., which created the Ventra fare card for those agencies.

The development cost is budgeted at \$2.5 million, to be split among the three transit agencies.

Members of three South Side community organizations, however, contend the app won't be available for some low-income and elderly riders, either because they can't afford smartphones or don't have the need or ability to use them.

Members of the three groups — the Hyde Park-based Coalition for Equitable Community Development, the Hyde Park-Kenwood Community Conference and the Coalition for a Lakeside Collective Bargaining Agreement — appeared before Metra's board Wednesday to voice their concerns.

Linda Thisted, a spokeswoman for the Coalition for Equitable Community Development, said the app does not comply with 2011 legislation that called for a "universal fare card" that transit riders can use interchangeably on the CTA, Pace and Metra.

"The smartphone app is contrary to the legislation because it discriminates against seniors and low-income people," Thisted said.

The groups also contend Metra is taking advantage of a loophole in state law to allow the commuter rail agency to avoid adoption of the Ventra card in the same way that the CTA and Pace have done.

The groups' concerns prompted two state lawmakers, Rep. Barbara Flynn Currie and Rep. Christian Mitchell, both from South Side districts, to question whether Metra is complying with the spirit of the 2011 law.

Metra officials said they believe the groups have misconstrued what the app is designed to do and have misinterpreted the state law.

Metra Chairman Martin Oberman said the agency was committed to meeting the requirements of the law and enabling transit users to use the Ventra card "everywhere they can."

"The phone app and Ventra are not mutually exclusive," Oberman said.

Once aboard a train, the app will enable riders to show their phone to conductors and tap the image of the ticket or pass to confirm they are a paying customer.

Metra emphasized that mobile ticketing is a supplementary system and that it is not eliminating paper tickets for customers who prefer that option or don't own a smartphone.

The agency has been testing the app for much of this year and is working to eliminate glitches, said Lynette Ciavarella, who is heading development for Metra.

The universal fare card wording in the 2011 state law was used only in the legislation's synopsis, not in the actual text of the legislation itself. The text calls for implementation of "a regional fare payment system."

Metra officials say the agency satisfies the law because customers can use credit or debit cards, including Ventra cards, to buy tickets. Metra faces more obstacles to a single-card system because it does not have turnstiles and its fares are distance-based, officials say.

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