CTA Blue Line Forest Park Branch Vision Study Approaching Conclusion

The Chicago Transit Authority (CTA) initiated the Blue Line Forest Park Branch Vision Study as an opportunity to examine the branch as a whole and determine the best way to serve future ridership. CTA looked at the needs of the transit corridor, specifically evaluating existing infrastructure conditions, transit markets and service patterns to provide recommendations for the branch going forward.

Starting in 2009, the Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT) began its I-290 (Eisenhower Expressway) Phase I Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) Study within the multimodal corridor adjacent to the CTA Forest Park Branch of the Blue Line. When CTA began the Vision Study in 2013, CTA and IDOT coordinated planning efforts as well as CTA participation in IDOT project outreach along the corridor.
Current Conditions

On an average weekday the Blue Line Forest Park Branch carries over 32,000 passengers - nearly 10 million passengers per year.

- More than 20% of the branch operates under slow zones because of track conditions – more track miles than any other branch in the system. Slow zones cause delays, unreliable service and longer travel times for daily commuters.
- Only 10% of the track system has been replaced, leaving 90% from the original installation in 1958. The age of this infrastructure leads to poor drainage and the gradual deterioration to rail ties, tracks and ballast.
- Many stations are antiquated and are not accessible to customers with disabilities.
- Many stations and bridges are approaching the end of their useful lives.
- The design of the station platforms adjacent to I-290 highway leaves customers exposed to vehicle noise and harsh weather elements. Pedestrian access to the station access is constrained by the highway access and narrow sidewalks.
- The CTA Yard and Shop at the end of the branch are approaching the end of their useful lives.
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Recommendations: Shaped by Stakeholder Outreach

Based on the findings of the Blue Line Forest Park Branch Vision Study, the CTA recommends reconstructing the entire Forest Park Branch.

- Rehabilitate infrastructure, starting with track work (addressing persistent slow zones and the need for continual maintenance in order to delay increases to slow zone totals)
- Propose wider station platforms and elevator access for each station on the branch
- Propose design features to improve customer experience, including improved noise and weather protection and consistent aesthetics between stations
- Include a turn-back track at Illinois Medical District to accommodate construction phasing
- Redesign the Forest Park Branch Terminal, Yard and Shop within the current parcel to modernize the maintenance areas as well as bus and pedestrian connections

Comprehensive Stakeholder Outreach

The extensive outreach effort over the last few years has resulted in valuable stakeholder feedback at each step of the Blue Line Forest Park Branch Vision Study process. Stakeholder comments have informed CTA recommendations and all Public Meeting comments were addressed by CTA. Individuals on the study mailing list received invitations in the mail or via e-mail announcing upcoming meetings and website updates.

The specific service recommendations are:
- Bring service back up to design speeds.
- Maintain existing two track configuration.
- Continue to perform interim slow zone maintenance work on branch as needed (short-term).

Specific station designs will be developed as the project advances. In general, the study recommends keeping existing station layouts for double entry stations. Auxiliary entrances will be added to single entry stations, including Cicero, Pulaski and Western, to increase access to those stations.

As the Forest Park Branch shares the right-of-way with I-290, operating within the median and directly to the south of the expressway throughout the corridor recommended improvements for the Blue Line Forest Park Branch will continue to be planned in coordination with IDOT’s current planning and future phases for the reconstruction of I-290.
Next Steps

This study utilized planning funds obtained by CTA, in partnership with the Village of Oak Park and IDOT.

The CTA will continue working with elected officials, local, state, and federal agencies to secure the necessary funding to keep this project progressing. In order to move from study to construction, the project will need to transition from the planning phase to the project development phase, which includes environmental analyses in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA) and preliminary engineering. Through that process, stakeholders will have additional opportunities to provide feedback in regard to improvements to the CTA Blue Line Forest Park Branch.

COSTS INCLUDE:

- Track and related infrastructure;
- Reconstruction of Forest Park Yard, Shop and Terminal;
- Upgrade stations from UIC-Halsted to Forest Park; and
- Six power substations.

Construction start is contingent on identifying funding. Costs are based on conceptual planning study which will be refined in the project development process and are estimated at $1.7B in 2016.