

## **Transportation: Memories and The Way We Were**

Memories light the corners of my mind, misty water color memories of the way we were. That is the first verse of a song, The Way We Were; made famous by Barbra Streisand in 1973. It is also the theme song for the movie she starred in with Robert Redford.

In 1947, the Chicago Transit Authority (CTA) began operating rapid transit lines in the city of Chicago. A [timeline](#) gives a brief synopsis over the years of the service routes. The bus routes came in 1952, when CTA took over the Chicago Motor Coach System.

I was born and raised in the North Lawndale community on the Westside of Chicago. Growing up in the 70s, if your family didn't have a car as a means for travel, you could depend on public transportation (CTA). There was a bus route on every major main street on the West Side. For the most part, taking the bus or the train was the best way to travel.

The Fall of 1973 was the first time I started riding the bus every day to get to high school; some days by myself, some days with friends from grammar school. It was a new world for me because I was no longer accompanied by my mother or a sibling. It was during that time when the majority of buses and trains were running 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Bus fare (or "car fare" a term used during that time) was 45 cents and a transfer was 10 cents. By the end of the decade the fare was 65 cents, the transfer was still a dime.

As time moved on, transportation started to change. In the 80s, service cuts began to happen, and fares started to increase. Everyone felt the increase, but few people noticed the cuts. I noticed the cuts, because it affected me, my family and my community. I started writing letters to my Alderman and trying to get neighbors involved to advocate to keep those services in our community.

In the 90s, due to budget shortfalls, service cuts started to affect the city, but even more in the minority communities because we faced more cuts than anyone else. The owl services began to disappear, and timelines for some routes were cut during midday, meaning buses would run less frequently except during morning and evening rush hour.

By the late 90s, the cuts hit the West Side really hard. The communities of North Lawndale, Little Village, Garfield Park and Austin were affected the most, as entire routes were discontinued, owl service cuts hit more routes, some routes ended by 7:00 pm and rail line stations were closed or dismantled. Town Hall meetings were held only weeks before the cuts were to take place. CTA officials cited the reasons for the cuts were due to low ridership in these communities. Residents were forced to find other means of transportation or find different routes to work, school, medical appointments,

etc. Some residents had to travel in opposite directions just to get to their destination. Dismantled and closed rail line stations were due to “public safety issues.” A few years later new stations (Green Line) popped up at different locations to serve a demographic that didn’t live in the community. We could argue back then that there shouldn’t have been any issues with public safety, since the Chicago Police Department patrolled the rail lines and bus routes during that decade.

During the past 25 years, transportation has become a huge political fight in a way where residents feel we can no longer sit by and just let the city and state call the shots on how transportation should be run. Transit advocates across the city and state have been instrumental in holding a voice for the voiceless when it comes to transportation.

Little did I know, I would join those advocates to share my voice to help strengthen the fight. In 2008, more cuts hit my community and I felt the need to make a stronger stand. I went to my local officials and other residents asking for help to retain one particular bus route that was very key to our community, especially for senior residents. I wrote letters, made calls, showed up to meetings, but my voice fell on deaf ears. Losing this route cut our community off from a straight route to work, school, through the Illinois Medical District and downtown, to a round-about way of taking 2 to 3 routes to reach those destinations.

Fast forward to 2015, a new community group founded by North Lawndale residents to create a new Quality of Life Plan, I joined the transportation committee in hopes of bringing back the bus route we lost. That meant more conversations with local officials, CTA, residents and anyone else who would listen. I didn’t know at the time, people were listening and the phone calls started coming in. Our partnerships with stakeholders and other community advocates played a huge role in getting our voices in rooms that rejected us in the past. It was a long journey, but well worth it and I am truly thankful to all of those voices. At my insistence, my former Alderman finally started having conversations with CTA and sharing my reasons why our community not only needed this route extended back to our community, but we deserved it.

Our group advocated for the route to extend to the Kostner Pink Line. In the summer of 2019, our group received news that the CTA agreed to a six-month pilot program to reinstate and re-evaluate the extension of (157 Streeter/ville/Taylor route) to the Pulaski Pink Line. In February 2020, we received news that the pilot would start in April and then COVID happened. That set the pilot back a few months to June. Once we knew the route was returning, we posted information everywhere in the community and on social media. There were several news media reports about the route being reinstated as well. However, the pandemic kept the ridership low, not only on this route, but across the city as well. The residents of North Lawndale were extremely happy to have the

route back and started using it again to get to their medical appointments. Keeping medical appointments had a huge impact on the residents not having that route, so it truly was welcomed back. In January 2021, CTA made the extension permanent. This was a huge win for the North Lawndale and Little Village communities. The ridership has increased tremendously, and residents talk about how peaceful and safe they feel using this route to navigate through the medical district and getting downtown.

It is important to know moving forward that underserved communities are negatively affected when bus and train services are interrupted by budget cuts, especially because we are always on the chopping block first. Our communities use public transportation just as much, if not more than other communities not because we want to, but because it is a necessity. There are other routes that need to be extended back to their original routes, as well as a reactivation of owl services to connect city routes to suburban routes for shift workers to and from work on far and hard to get to beginning and end stops.

All transportation agencies need to consider the improvement of physical accessibility, comfort and safety for all passengers regardless of their socioeconomic status. Prioritizing the needs of communities who have continued to be discriminated against and excluded because of race, gender, disabilities and addressing systemic inequalities is a must. Stop dismantling train stations in underserved areas and rebuilding them several blocks down because the demographics change and there is no bus to train connections.

Rochelle Jackson serves as chair of the North Lawndale Community Coordinating Council (NLCCC) Transportation/Infrastructure Committee, Rochelle works closely with committee members, several transit agencies and community stakeholders to bring improved infrastructure, and other modes of transportation to the North Lawndale and Little Village communities.