**Chicago mayoral candidates sound off on transit priorities**

**By**[**Tracy Swartz**](http://www.redeyechicago.com/redeye-tracy-swartz-20150116-staff.html)RedEye

**How do Mayor Emanuel's transit priorities compared to Jesus "Chuy" Garcia's priorities?**

**Where Chicago mayor candidates stand on the CTA's future**

Add one more item to the list of topics Mayor Emanuel and his formidable challenger Cook County Commissioner Jesus "Chuy" Garcia disagree on: Emanuel's proposed flyover at the Belmont stop in Lakeview.

Though they've spent lots of time shaking commuter hands at CTA stops, Emanuel and Garcia have been vague on what Chicago transit will look like over the next four years. Garcia hasn't detailed what specific transit projects he would push if he were elected while Emanuel has stuck to promoting plans already announced or in the works.

One Emanuel proposal Garcia is against is the proposed $320 million flyover, which Garcia criticized as "an unnecessary expenditure of taxpayer funds that will generate little return on investment" in an email via his spokeswoman.

Under Emanuel's direction, the CTA has proposed creating an elevated ramp that would allow Brown Line trains to bypass Red and Purple Line train traffic at the Belmont stop.

The move would reduce commute wait times at that station by a few minutes and is necessary to be able to handle future Red Line train capacity, CTA officials say. But some Lakeview residents have complained that the ramp would look like a rollercoaster in the middle of their neighborhood and more than a dozen buildings would be torn down to build the flyover.

There is no specific construction timeline for the proposed Belmont flyover, which is awaiting funding.

Emanuel has not recently laid out new plans for the CTA but has pushed proposals already in the works, including the continuation of repair work to North Side Blue Line stations. If funding is found, the city also likely will move forward on a controversial proposal to create a $160 million express bus system along Ashland Avenue.

For his part, Garcia hasn't been specific about his Chicago transit plans. On his website chicagoforchuy.com, Garcia advocates finding new ways to fund public transit, including private partnerships, but doesn't mention any specific projects he would pursue if he is elected mayor.

The mayor plays a large role in the future of the CTA because the mayor picks the CTA president and half the members of the CTA board. The CTA's list of projects is the mayor's list of projects. From the proposed Ashland Avenue express bus system to increasing CTA ridership, RedEye compares Emanuel's transit priorities with Garcia's priorities.

**On his top transit priority:**Emanuel's priority is to "continue rebuilding the Red Line— both the north branch and extending it past 95th," spokesman David Spielfogel said in an email. The CTA plans on holding community meetings this year about potentially extending the Red Line from 95th Street to 130th Street, a project that has been talked about for decades.

In an email through his spokeswoman, Garcia said his top transit priority "would be to provide sufficient and stable funding for transit in the region."

**On how to increase CTA ridership:**Though the CTA still is calculating ridership figures from December, it looks like the agency will see its second consecutive year of ridership decreases systemwide.

Emanuel spokesman Adam Collins said CTA ridership "remains strong" but saw a dip last year because of sub-zero temperatures.

Garcia said to increase ridership, ideally all transit lines, not just the Red and Blue lines, should operate round the clock. The cost of increasing that service is unknown. "No parts of Chicago or the metropolitan area should be isolated from public transit; twenty-four hour service should be available to all communities; and, the different systems (CTA, Metra, Pace) should be integrated to attract more riders," Garcia said in an email.

**On the Ashland Avenue express bus system:**Under Emanuel, the CTA has proposed building an express bus system, called bus rapid transit, along 16 miles of Ashland Avenue from Irving Park Road on the North Side to 95th Street on the South Side. The proposal would speed bus commutes on Ashland Avenue, but some local residents and business owners have expressed concern over the elimination of car lanes and left-hand turns on the busy thoroughfare.

Garcia said he would support the Ashland proposal if there is a better compromise with residents and business associations. "There are a multitude of concerns that have been raised, including limited number of car lanes and left turns," Garcia said in an email.

**On retaining Forrest Claypool as CTA president:**Emanuel would retain Claypool as president because Claypool has consistently delivered projects on schedule and within budget and he's focused on improving the ridership experience, Spielfogel said.

Garcia said he would make this decision upon election. Claypool, a former Cook County commissioner, endorsed Garcia in his campaign for a seat on the Cook County Board more than five years ago.