“Oh, we’re just following the train line. We’re looking for a residence where we can walk to the train, we’ve heard about your traffic in Chicago,” the house-hunting couple told Louise McCormick, Sales Manager for Station Square at Prairie Crossing. That’s a typical response, says McCormick, when she asks people how they found the condominium project steps from Prairie Crossing station on Metra’s North Central Service Line. Answers like that validate the importance passenger rail can play in community development in a world with skyrocketing gasoline prices and long, exhausting automobile commutes.

Ranking second only to New York City’s Long Island and Metro North railroads, Metra trains move more than 300,000 riders on weekdays. The system boasts 11 lines serving 238 stations over 565 miles of track in six counties in Illinois and one in Wisconsin. 735 trains provide service every weekday, with 303 of those operating on Saturdays and 180 on Sundays and holidays. At the same time, more than 96 percent of its trains operate on schedule.

Transit-Oriented Development: the Chicago Perspective

Metra as Community Builder

Texas A&M University’s Texas
Transportation Institute reports the Chicago region currently ranks third in the nation in terms of traffic congestion. As Chicagoland sits stuck in traffic about 58 hours per year and waste more than 150 million gallons of fuel annually, it costs each traveler about $1,000 and costs the region nearly $5 billion per year in wasted fuel and time. “It’s going to get worse,” says George Ranney, President and CEO of Chicago Metropolis 2020, an organization created to promote long-term planning and investing in public transportation in the Chicago region. Ranney is also Chairman and CEO of Prairie Holding Corporation, the company that developed Station Square. “We’re expecting 2 million people here in the next two decades if existing trends continue. That’s 800,000 new jobs, a million new cars. Statistics show that within the next 20 years, every motorist will be spending 160 hours in traffic. That would have a huge adverse impact upon the quality of life and employee production.”

“Commuter rail in this region is one of the economic engines that makes this region work,” says Pagano. “This region is no different than other regions in the United States where there is a tremendous traffic problem. We need to move people. About a year ago, the Illinois Department of Transportation said that without Metra service, they’d have to build about 33 additional lanes of highway. That would be nearly impossible to do.”

With a population boom on the horizon, Metra’s role as a cog in the machinery that will keep the region moving is significant. Transit planners and transit-savvy developers are gearing up for the boom, too, by looking to the past and the future for ways to tune into the needs of commuters. Transit Oriented Development (TOD), like Station Square at Prairie Crossing, is a key component.

TOD really isn’t new to the Chicago area. Metra has a vast legacy of commuter rail history to draw on as it charts its future, a history that demonstrates rail’s value to community evolution.

**Station Square at Prairie Crossing: A Mini Rail Hub**

Station Square at Prairie Crossing is a textbook example of transit’s role in a newer community. It’s unique because Metra’s North Central Service (NCS) and Milwaukee District North Line (MD-N) into Union Station stop at two stations named Prairie Crossing within a 3-minute walk from one another. The NCS line station is on the doorstep of Station Square’s 36-unit condominium and retail complex and about 200 single-family homes that are part of a 359-home subdivision.

When Prairie Holding Corporation acquired land in 1987 in Grayslake, about 40 miles northwest of Chicago, Metra hadn’t committed to building another station in the area. “We weren’t sure we’d get the rail service,” says Ben Ranney, Principal with Terra Firma, the company handling Station Square’s condominium sales and retail leasing. “We knew we couldn’t count on it at the outset. And, I don’t think at the time we realized what a benefit it might be.” After the station was approved, Prairie Holding completely revised its land plan to take advantage of the station. In time, Metra predicts Prairie Crossing will become a regional transit center.

The single-family homes sold out about two years ago and 18 of the 36 condominiums have sold. Retail space below the living units opened last year with about 60 percent...
leased to tenants like a coffee shop and a children’s bookstore. Land and entitlements are in place to add about 50,000 square feet of office and commercial components.

“There’s no question that Metra provided a very logical center so that is what we used as our core as we were planning the development,” Ranney says. “We’ve found that the idea that we can have people coming from further afield and coming to this neighborhood as a result of the train is just a huge boon. What we’re starting to recognize in various places out here is that not everyone is taking the train to downtown Chicago. When Glenview Naval Air Station closed, it was redeveloped as an office, commercial and residential center that’s within walking distance of the MD-N Line, so people from Prairie Crossing can go 20 minutes on the train as opposed to an hour and 10 minutes.”

John Watson, a graduate student doing his thesis on community building, recently surveyed Prairie Crossing residents and found that of the 210 households that responded, 46 commuted on Metra daily and another 27 rode the train at least once per week. Additionally, 26.5 percent said that the “close proximity to mass transit” ranked among the top three factors that prompted them to move to Prairie Crossing. “Clearly, transit-oriented development is a viable way to get people out of their cars to use mass transit,” Ranney says.

Elburn: Poised for Growth

After almost 100 years of service to Chicago, flagging ridership spelled the end for Elburn’s trains in the mid-1950s. But phenomenal growth on the Union Pacific-West (UP-W) Line brought trains back in 2006, after 10 years of negotiation with Metra, the RTA, Union Pacific and village leaders. Now Elburn is gearing up to embrace its next chapter of development.

Certain to be the centerpiece of TOD is Geneva, Ill., based developer Sho-Deen Construction’s plans to build a mix of residential and commercial properties around Elburn station. “They’re looking to essentially create a downtown in that area with a lot of foot traffic,” says Jim Stran, Elburn’s building commissioner.

Sho-Deen owns property on all four sides of the Metra station and has proposed a mixed-use development of about 2,000 residential units—single-family, condominiums, multifamily—and retail and commercial space. “We want to appeal to a wide range of markets,” says Sho-Deen’s President, David Patzelt. “It’s not only the younger crowds and the younger professionals attracted to transit-oriented design, it’s the empty nesters, too.” Elburn is still in the planning stages, but Sho-Deen hopes to begin construction in about two years so people can start walking, biking and rollerblading to the train station.

Another Sho-Deen project, East Bank, on the Fox River in Aurora, revolves around an abandoned train station. East Bank is awaiting city approval to build up to 2,000 housing units, a hotel and commercial space.
and refurbish the rail station for possible Metra and Amtrak use. Patzelt believes the return of rail will provide a tremendous opportunity for reverse commutes and a profit center for the train. Metra’s Burlington Northern Santa Fe Line (BNSF), he says, is also a perfect launching pad to extend rail into Montgomery and Oswego, where residents must take buses to Aurora to ride the train to Chicago. A 2008 groundbreaking is anticipated with completion in about two years.

Restoring Downtown Around Transit in Arlington Heights

Like many U.S. cities in the 1980s, downtown Arlington Heights, about 25 miles northwest of Chicago, was seeking to reinvigorate the local economy and begin development — and redevelopment — of its town center. City fathers adopted a master plan for the central business district in 1987, making the 175-year-old village one of the first municipalities in the region to undertake an extensive revitalization program involving TOD.

“The train is the cornerstone,” says Arlington Heights Mayor Arlene Mulder, who also serves on Metra’s Board of Directors. Daily, more than 3,000 passengers ride Metra’s Union Pacific Northwest Line (UP-NW) into the city and there’s a growing reverse commute. “We wanted a mixed-use development, we wanted a 24-hour environment, which is somewhat of an urban feel but still in a quieter fashion.”

A once lifeless downtown now hums with activity. Events at a new outdoor venue attract up to 20,000 people; there’s an intimate 350-seat performing arts center and movie theaters. The new Arlington Heights feels like a village from another era with its clock tower, brick sidewalks, shade trees, walking paths, sculptures, art events and plenty of walkways and benches where doting parents and grandparents can bring their grandkids to watch trains roll by. A focal point is the $4.8 million 1900-style slate-roofed train station. Partly funded by Metra, it opened in 2000.

Tax Incrementing Financing Districts, created in the 1980s subsidized the redevelopment. “We probably have about 1,200 living units now and they’re all within two blocks of the Metra station. Some of these condos started out at $159,000 for a one-bedroom unit; within a year, they were selling for $225,000, and now you can’t get a one-bedroom for less than $260,000, $270,000,” Mulder says. Housing near rail lines is in demand and some realtors devote entire sections of their Web sites to properties near transit.

“Our whole concept is to return to life much as we’ve known it in the European countries for centuries and here in the 1900s where the baker actually lived above his bakery, the pharmacist lived above his pharmacy, and you had dwelling units,” Mulder says. Early on, transit was important to Arlington Heights. “The railroad was going to go through a town directly south of us, so one of our founders paid them to change their route so it would go through the property he owned. The funny story is that when he looked more closely at the map, it was going through his existing house, but he said, ‘No problem, I’ll move it.’”

Like other communities, Arlington Heights has a mix of young professionals and empty nesters. “It’s almost a Mayberry, but it’s bigger,” Mulder says. “We have a real pedestrian-friendly feel. It’s a place where people can walk five minutes to the train and go into the city to work and bring their money back to spend at the local hairdresser, barber, banks, shops and grocery store. We have some of the very finest restaurants. People come out on the train to go them because you can literally get off the train and boom, the restaurant is right across the track. Friday and Saturday night, you have a two-hour wait.”

Older communities are recognizing that higher density and more vertical mid-rise type construction is in demand and attracts revitalization. Transit-oriented development is bringing people back to the older communities and encouraging downtown redevelopment, which in turn brings disposable income dollars back into their communities in comparison to when they used to be spent in the outskirts or at shopping malls. For newer communities, a rail line puts them into a good position to manage their growth. Such development also benefits train operators because more people are riding in both directions, which results in operations that are more efficient.