

From: [Steele, Brian](#)
To: [Mayberry, Stephen](#)
Cc: [Hosinski, Catherine](#); [Gonzales, Manny](#)
Subject: DRC Board remarks
Date: Tuesday, January 16, 2024 10:30:00 AM
Attachments: [Commuters Take Action LTE Tribune Response FINAL 011524.docx](#)

Good morning. Hope you are staying warm.

7(1)(f)

DRC's LTE is attached, for reference. Happy to chat if needed.

Thank you.

Letter to the Editor
Chicago Tribune
1/15/24

While we appreciate a recent commentary about the very important issue of filling Rail Operator positions to improve train service in Chicago, the commentary drew incorrect conclusions and misstated a few facts (“Commuter advocates: The CTA vows to double rail operator trainees this year. Its data shows that’s impossible”, Jan. 11, 2024).

Contrary to suggestions in the commentary, CTA fills the ranks of flaggers—the steppingstone to becoming a rail operator—from both internal candidates and external applicants. Internal candidates are given priority for flagger vacancies, in keeping with our collective bargaining agreement with our union, which calls for the positions to be offered to existing CTA rail employees first. CTA most recently took applicants for the flagger position in October and November last year and received over 800 applications. Many of those successful applicants are now filling our Flagger ranks. CTA will further augment that hiring with a [career fair](#) aimed at flagger candidates later this month.

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Why are flaggers the best path to becoming a rail operator? Flaggers are thoroughly trained on right-of-way safety, rail operations, and system communications. This training and experience in railroad operations are an important prerequisite for becoming a rail operator--a standard that allows us to maintain the highest safety standards for both riders and employees. CTA will not compromise safety for expediency.

The framework we have in place will provide more than enough flaggers to meet our training goal of 200 operators—which we have also supported by increasing the size of our training classes from 12 to 20. And when those flaggers become operators, we have a large pool of customer-service assistants ready to backfill vacant flagger spots. Hiring is a holistic process, not solely defined by numbers on one category.

As we have done with bus hiring—last year we hired 1,000 new bus operators, more than at any time in CTA history—we will make similar progress on the rail side. And to make sure the new operators get the comprehensive training they need, we’ve trained a new class of rail instructors to handle the increased instruction demand and brought back retired rail instructors to help.

The data analysis in the commentary may have been well-intended, but unfortunately was incomplete and painted an inaccurate picture. Using data to draw conclusions, without understanding context of the numbers, only leads to an incorrect narrative.

DRAFT – For Planning

We recognize there is more work to be done to strengthen our Rail Operator workforce. We are making progress, and we're fully committed to that goal-and will continue to keep the public informed on our progress at transitchicago.com/performance

(signed)

Dorval R. Carter, Jr.

President

CTA

From: [Steele, Brian](#)
To: [Leerhsen, Nora](#)
Subject: FW: An Open Letter to the CTA's leadership, the Transit Board, the City Council, and Mayor Brandon Johnson
Date: Wednesday, January 24, 2024 11:13:00 AM
Attachments: 7(1)(f)

FYI, in case you didn't receive it.

7(1)(f)

Thank you.

From: Commuters Take Action <commuterstakeaction@gmail.com>
Sent: Wednesday, January 24, 2024 10:36 AM
To: Commuters Take Action <commuterstakeaction@gmail.com>
Subject: An Open Letter to the CTA's leadership, the Transit Board, the City Council, and Mayor Brandon Johnson

Some people who received this message don't often get email from commuterstakeaction@gmail.com. [Learn why this is important](#)

****EXTERNAL EMAIL**** This email originated outside of CTA. ****NEVER CLICK or OPEN**** unexpected links or attachments. ****NEVER**** provide User ID or Password. CTA IT Support will NEVER ask you for such information. If this email seems suspicious, contact CTA Help Desk at x12345.

At the Chicago Transit Board's Jan. 18 meeting, CTA President Dorval Carter berated private citizens for an [op-ed](#) they wrote in an attempt to hold him — and other CTA leadership — accountable.

[On the public record](#), President Carter accused us, the op-ed writers, of being unwilling to talk to him and other CTA officials and of having “an agenda that isn't consistent with wanting to make the system better, but is consistent with trying to attack the agency or individuals in the agency.” He also stated that “engagement is a two-way process,” implying that he wants to engage with us, but we aren't willing to engage with him.

For a government official to use a public meeting to attack private citizens like this is inappropriate, unprofessional, and unbecoming of his role. What makes it worse is that he's lying again.

We belong to the grassroots advocacy organization [Commuters Take Action](#). For the last two years, CTAction has been trying to communicate and engage with CTA

leadership and the Transit Board. They've stonewalled us at every turn.

10 of our members' many public comments at Transit Board meetings have included explicit invitations for CTA leadership and board members to contact or work with us.

We've sent requests to the CTA's media and communications department.

We've invited CTA leadership and board members to our events.

We've emailed the Transit Board directly.

Our members have even reached out to board members on LinkedIn.

We have *never* received a response from CTA Vice President of Communications and Marketing Brian Steele, or anyone else in the CTA's media and communications department.

We have *never* received a response from Dorval Carter or anyone on the Transit Board.

The *only* person in CTA leadership to respond to or meet with us is CTA Director of Equity and Engagement Denise Barreto.

Every detail we learn about CTA operations has to be obtained with a FOIA request — a process that takes, at its fastest, 30 calendar days (and often requires assistance from the Illinois Attorney General's office because the CTA routinely delays responding to us).

Engagement is a two-way process? For two years, it's been going one way. We've been engaging with the CTA and the Transit Board every way we know how, and they have absolutely refused to engage with us — or any of the public, for that matter.

Members of the board are finally starting to say that they want better communication and more transparency from the CTA. Board members even called for President Carter to meet with advocacy groups like ours. But why isn't the board challenging their president's behavior, when he dodges City Council meetings, hasn't held a public forum or press conference in years, and openly and repeatedly lies during board meetings, the only time he makes any sort of public address?

It is not our responsibility to force transparency from a tax-funded government agency. We just happen to be the only people doing it.

That brings us to the real issue: Where does the buck actually stop? Who is going to step up and hold Dorval Carter accountable for this years-long, consistent failure to do his job? It's become clear that it won't be anyone else in CTA leadership. It won't be the Transit Board. It won't be the mayor. It won't be the City Council. All of these people have the power, but none have the conviction. None are willing to step up.

We are private citizens, yet we've been doing this work for two years. We've invested countless hours and immeasurable energy into trying to save the CTA from a president who is mismanaging it into failure and brazenly lies about it. We have years of data that proves the CTA is significantly worse off now than it was before Dorval Carter, and that the system is objectively failing compared to other U.S. transit agencies. We're not attacking the system. **We're trying to save it.** Our only agenda is love for the CTA and wanting to turn it around before it's too late.

We are calling on CTA's leadership, the Transit Board, the City Council, Mayor Johnson — all the people in the City of Chicago who should be doing the work we've been doing for you. Please, finally, do your jobs. Do the jobs that we, and all of Chicago's other taxpayers, elected you and pay you to do. Hold Dorval Carter accountable. **Demand honest, transparent CTA leadership.** Help us save the CTA.

--

Commuters Take Action - working together to use our collective voice and demand reliable transportation, accurate schedules, and safe working and travel conditions.

Check us out: ctaaction.org | Twitter: [ctaaction](https://twitter.com/ctaaction) | IG: [ctaaction](https://www.instagram.com/ctaaction) | Linktree: [commutersTakeAction](https://linktr.ee/commutersTakeAction)

From: [McKone, Tom](#)
To: [Moreno, Alex](#); [Ester, Geisha](#); [Besic, Mersija](#)
Subject: FW: FYI - Chicago Tribune Commuter advocates: The CTA vows to double its rail operators this year. Its own data shows that's impossible. (Commuters Take Action)
Date: Thursday, January 11, 2024 9:20:00 AM

For awareness. 7(1)(f)

Chicago Tribune

Commuter advocates: The CTA vows to double its rail operators this year. Its own data shows that's impossible.

By Nik Hunder and Christina Marfice Chicago Tribune

Published: Jan 11, 2024 at 5:00 am

<https://www.chicagotribune.com/opinion/commentary/ct-opinion-chicago-cta-impossible-train-rail-operators-20240111-i3c55dfisbbqjergfua566pnl4-story.html>



CTA President Dorval Carter Jr. speaks with a train operator after riding the Yellow Line on Jan. 5, 2024, in Chicago, seven weeks after the Yellow Line reopened following a crash. (Stacey Wescott/Chicago Tribune)

At the [November meeting](#) of the Chicago Transit Board, CTA President Dorval Carter Jr. addressed public concerns about the staffing challenges that have contributed to a continuing decline in rail service and reliability since 2020 and a lofty goal under his proposed budget for 2024.

Carter said his staff gave him a plan that would “more than double the number of rail operators that we will have next year,” bringing the number of operators from 100 to 200.

In early January, the Active Transportation Alliance published [an email](#) from the board, sent to community members and advocacy organizations that provided feedback on the rail operator shortage. Their email reiterates the CTA’s goal to double its training capacity from 100 rail operators to 200 this year.

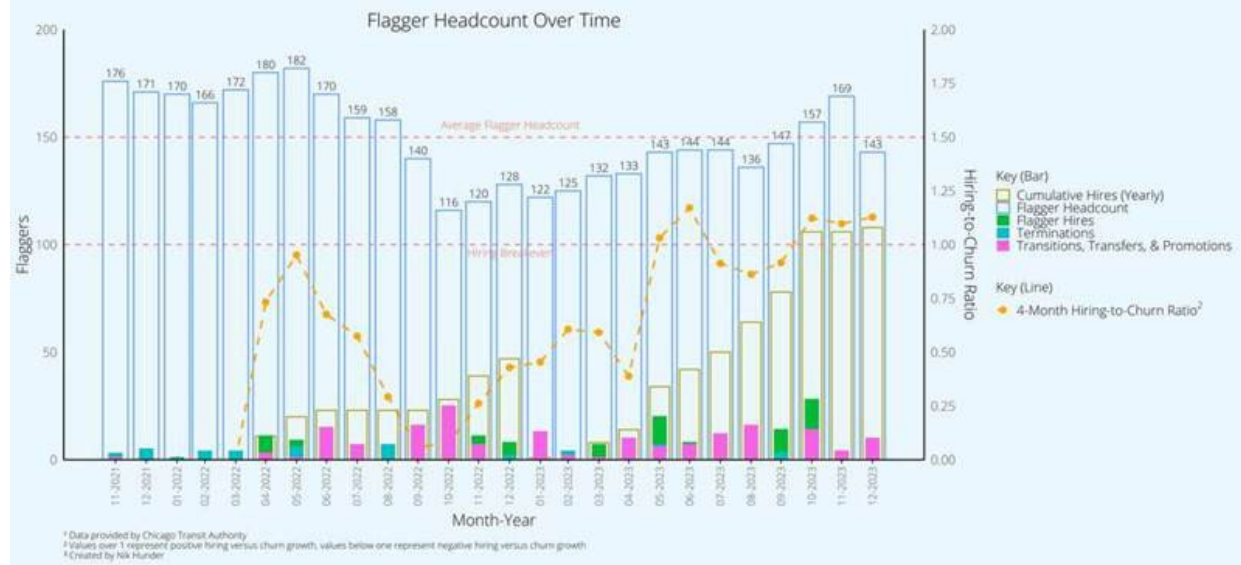
However, the CTA’s own data reveals that the agency cannot meet this goal due to its current training requirements, recruitment and retention levels.

We used the Freedom of Information Act to request the number of flaggers the CTA has employed since November 2021 — plus how many flaggers were terminated, promoted, transitioned or transferred to other roles each month since then.

The CTA requires prospective rail operators to first spend at least 12 months working as flaggers. According to the CTA, working as a flagger helps future rail operators learn essential safety procedures and fundamental skills. After 12 months of service, flaggers become eligible to enroll in rail operator training classes. The CTA may be able to work with the Amalgamated Transit Union to waive the 12-month flagger requirement — or shorten it — but agency leaders have repeatedly said they are against doing so for safety reasons. Most recently, Carter [confirmed at the November board meeting](#) that he plans to keep the 12-month requirement in place.

This means that in order to put 200 employees into rail operator training classes in 2024, the CTA needed to have a minimum of 200 flaggers employed by Dec. 31, 2023. In December, there were 143 flaggers working at the CTA. This makes it mathematically

impossible for the agency to fill 200 rail operator training slots this year.



CTA flagger head count over time. Data provided by the CTA. (Nik Hunder/Hand)

To make matters worse, the CTA is not recruiting flaggers fast enough to keep up with how many it claims it will enroll in rail operator training classes — plus the number it loses each month due to terminations, promotions, transitions and transfers. Based on a four-month average of its hiring-to-churn ratio, the CTA was gaining net 1.13 flaggers per month as of December. At that rate, the agency would be on track to increase its flagger head count by about 13 — for a total of 156 — in 2024.

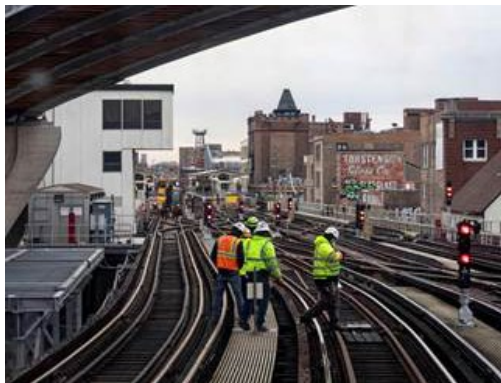
At this growth rate, it would take the CTA until May 2025 to gain enough new flaggers to fill just one rail operator training class without reducing its overall flagger head count. The only way for the CTA to keep enough flaggers to support day-to-day operations and fill all the training classes it has planned is to hire a lot more flaggers — and quickly.

But since at least Nov. 1, the CTA has not posted any job listings for flaggers [on its website](#). Between Nov. 1 and Dec. 31, the agency hired only two new flaggers — and lost 18 to terminations, promotions, transfers and role transitions.

That's the other disheartening side of the CTA's flagger workforce data: attrition.

The CTA lost more flaggers than it gained in 2023 — 133 were fired, promoted, transferred or transitioned to other roles, while only 108 were hired.

Rather than restart the 12-month clock each time an experienced flagger leaves, the CTA needs to better support its hardworking workforce. Flaggers should not feel like they need to leave their positions because of poor working conditions so they can pursue higher-quality positions. The sooner the CTA can stop flaggers from leaving, the sooner the agency can actually train 200 new rail operators.



CTA workers walk along Red, Purple and Brown "L" tracks near the Belmont station on Nov. 29, 2021. (Brian Cassella/Chicago Tribune)

Chicago's transit riders continue to face a struggling system with a dysfunctional president who deflects blame, [misrepresents data](#), [rarely rides the system](#) and hasn't given a public news conference since December 2022. The board [refuses to hold him](#)

[accountable](#) and instead praises his performance and [regularly raises his pay](#) — all while the CTA falls further into crisis.

And now the CTA is promising Chicagoans progress it simply cannot achieve.

Over the last few years, we've become used to a CTA whose leadership dodges transparency and obfuscates the truth. But promising to train 200 rail operators this year without nearly enough employees to do so is an astounding act of deception, even for the CTA.

It should never take a FOIA request to get to the truth behind a public agency's intentions. This deceit shows how far CTA leaders — including Carter — are willing to go to hide the true state of the system and try to get a rightly concerned public off their backs, even temporarily.

But Chicagoans deserve — and will find — the truth. The CTA is too important to let fail.

Nik Hunder and Christina Marfice are organizers with Commuters Take Action, a collective of frustrated Chicago commuters. Submit a letter, of no more than 400 words, to the editor [here](#) or email letters@chicagotribune.com.

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To: [Moreno, Alex](#); [Ester, Geisha](#)
Subject: FW: FYI--letter to the editor RE: Commuters' analysis of flagger hiring
Date: Tuesday, January 16, 2024 10:05:00 AM
Attachments: [Commuters Take Action LTE Tribune Response FINAL 011524.docx](#)

For awareness...

From: Steele, Brian <bsteale@transitchicago.com>
Sent: Tuesday, January 16, 2024 9:30 AM
To: Media Relations Dept <MediaRelationsDept@transitchicago.com>; Barreto, Denise <DBarreto@transitchicago.com>; Poppe, Molly <MPoppe@transitchicago.com>; Bonds, Donald <DBonds@transitchicago.com>; Alexander, Jeannie <JAlexander@transitchicago.com>
Cc: McKone, Tom <tmckone@transitchicago.com>
Subject: FYI--letter to the editor RE: Commuters' analysis of flagger hiring

Good morning.

FYI that we have prepared the attached LTE in response to last week's [oped](#) from the Commuters' group.

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1/15/24

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To: [McKone, Tom](#); [Alanis, Veronica](#); [Leerhsen, Nora](#); [Poppe, Molly](#)
Cc: [Gonzales, Manny](#); [Hosinski, Catherine](#)
Subject: Fwd: FYI - Chicago Tribune Commuter advocates: The CTA vows to double its rail operators this year. Its own data shows that's impossible. (Commuters Take Action)
Date: Thursday, January 11, 2024 8:45:57 AM

Good morning.

7(1)(f)

Many thanks.

Chicago Tribune

Commuter advocates: The CTA vows to double its rail operators this year. Its own data shows that's impossible.

By Nik Hunder and Christina Marfice Chicago Tribune

Published: Jan 11, 2024 at 5:00 am

<https://www.chicagotribune.com/opinion/commentary/ct-opinion-chicago-cta-impossible-train-rail-operators-20240111-i3c55dfisbbqjergfua566pn4-story.html>



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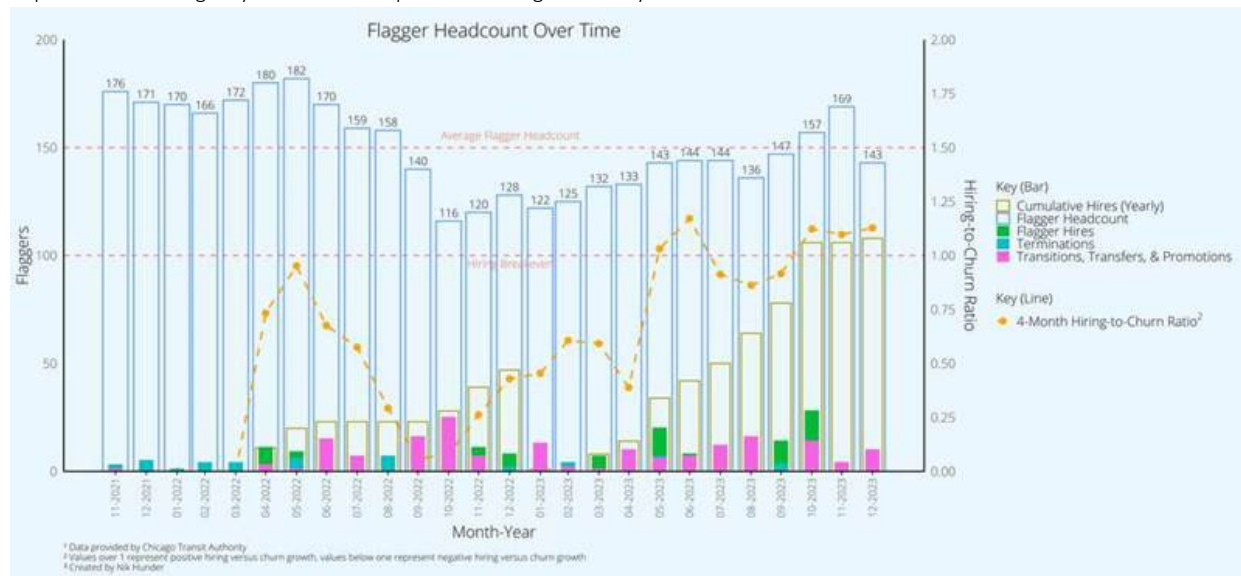
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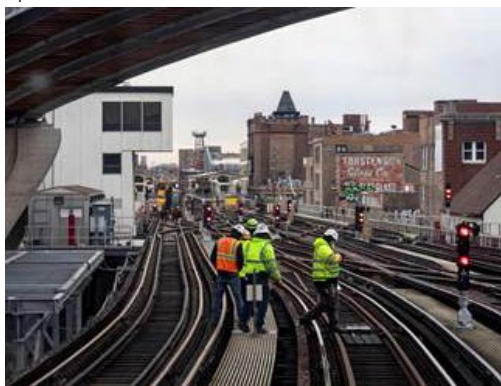
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From: [Carter, Dorval](#)
To: [Leerhsen, Nora](#); [Alanis, Veronica](#)
Subject: Fwd: It's frosty between Pritzker, Johnson
Date: Monday, December 4, 2023 7:53:34 AM

FYI see story about relationship between Governor and Mayor.

Dorval

From: POLITICO Illinois Playbook <illinoisplaybook@email.politico.com>
Sent: Monday, December 4, 2023 7:12:51 AM
To: Carter, Dorval <d2580carter@transitchicago.com>
Subject: It's frosty between Pritzker, Johnson

****EXTERNAL EMAIL**** This email originated outside of CTA. ****NEVER CLICK or OPEN**** unexpected links or attachments. ****NEVER**** provide User ID or Password. CTA IT Support will NEVER ask you for such information. If this email seems suspicious, contact CTA Help Desk at x12345.

Dec 04, 2023

[View in browser](#)

BY SHIA KAPOS

Happy Monday, Illinois. We're reporting today from the home office in D.C., where temps feel springy. Though 40s in Illinois are nice.

☐ TOP TALKER

BETWEEN THE LINES: The relationship between Gov. **JB Pritzker** and Chicago Mayor **Brandon Johnson** is frosty, [report Sun-Times' Fran Spielman and Tina Sfondeles in a story out today.](#)

The lead-in: “Don’t be fooled by the mayor’s winning smile and soaring, preacher’s son rhetoric, nor by the governor’s make-nice statements from the podium. There is real frustration and tension behind the scenes on both sides.”

The story cites what observers have noticed for months: “There is real frustration behind the scenes on both sides, stemming from the migrant crisis,

Chicago's crime wave, a tug of war over leadership of the Democratic National Convention and the parade of tax increases and costly mandates being imposed on Chicago's business community."

That tension was noticeable Friday, when a Pritzker spokeswoman said publicly that the governor's office was in the dark about an environmental report that was supposed to have been released by day's end about the Brighton Park migrant shelter. It was a sign that the usual intergovernmental communication system wasn't working.

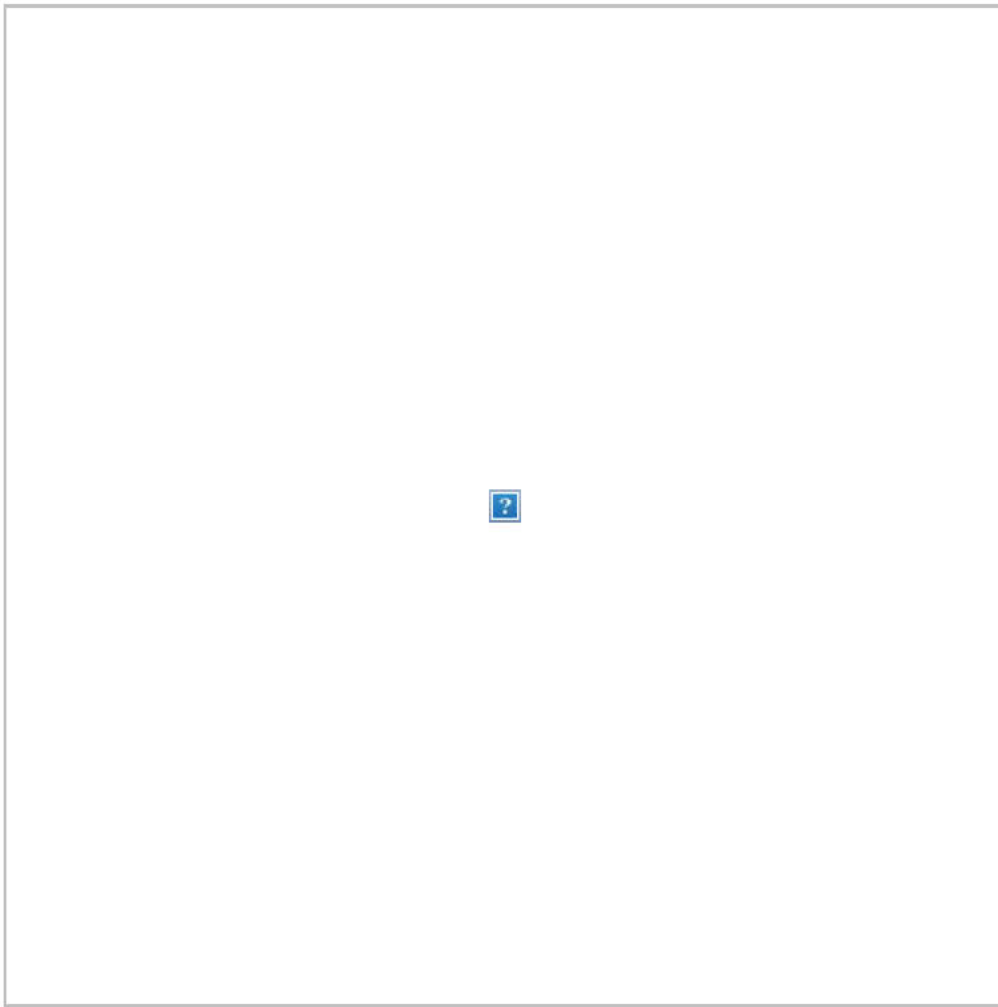
The response: Johnson's administration says it issued the environmental impact statement as soon as the city received it late Friday. "We could have waited until Monday [to go public with the report]. "But instead we began the process as soon as we had it. The time of the release had to do with a commitment to get it out ASAP," **Jason Lee**, the mayor's top adviser, told Playbook. The media (i.e. the public) saw it at about 8 p.m.

Tension has affected Democratic Convention planning, too: The reason it took so long for organizers of the 2024 Democratic National convention to name a host committee leader is because Johnson wanted control of the pick — even though Pritzker and Sen. **Tammy Duckworth** led efforts to bring the convention to Chicago.

In the end: Pritzker won the personnel battle, with a top aide, **Christy George**, named as DNC host committee executive director. Johnson's pick, **Keiana Barrett** is senior adviser.

Fueling the criticism: Last week, South Side Ald. **Jeanette Taylor** (20th), a Johnson ally suggested progressives aren't up to the task of managing City Hall.

"We should not be on the Fifth Floor. And I'm speaking my whole heart," [she told Ben Joravsky on his podcast](#). "We were not ready because we haven't been in government long enough to know how government really works. ... We're pretending like now we got the power, let us show you how it's supposed to be done. And we look real stupid, right now."



Ald. Debra Silverstein, at the podium, is staying with the City Council but won't seek reelection for Democratic committeeperson. | Silverstein's Twitter feed

BIG MOVE: Chicago Ald. Debra Silverstein, whose resolution condemning Hamas' attack in Israel passed after a fiery debate, has announced that she won't seek reelection as Democratic committeeperson of the 50th Ward.

She's endorsing Bruce Leon. Silverstein will continue to lead in her role as alderwoman of the 50th Ward and plans to for "many years to come," according to a statement from her political team.

"I am excited to see what Mr. Leon can do to build the Democratic Party of the 50th Ward," she said in a statement. "The 50th Ward is wonderfully diverse, and Mr. Leon will be a great steward for our community."

Silverstein said she'll assume "a leadership role" within Leon's organization

Leon praised Silverstein's move, saying, “She has our support as a public servant and as a voice for unity and equity.”

Silverstein is seeking Council approval of “CHI vs. Hate,” a rewrite of the City’s hate crime legislation. It would create a “hate incident” category and allow Chicagoans to report such incidents via 311. The legislation will be voted on by the Council’s Committee on Public Safety Committee on Friday before moving to the full council.

***If you are Bruce Leon**, Playbook would like to hear from you. Email skapos@politico.com*

☐ WHERE'S JB

At the Peoria Riverfront Museum at 10:30 a.m. [to celebrate](#) work on the Bob Michel Bridge restoration — At the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum at 1 p.m. [for a Christmas tree lighting](#) with Gold Star families.

☐ WHERE'S BRANDON

At Central Park Avenue at 9 a.m. for a safety project ribbon cutting.

☐ WHERE'S TONI

No official public event.

While the holiday cookies are baking, email me at skapos@politico.com

☐ BUSINESS OF POLITICS

— [Local Dem's game of musical chairs didn't work out as planned:](#)

“Champaign County Democratic Party Chairman **Mike Ingram** wanted to remain party boss despite being forced by statute to give up the position. Other people had other ideas, including his new frenemies, **Carol and Aaron Ammons**,” by the News Gazette’s Jim Dey.

— [Why Illinois' primary election is moving back to March in 2024:](#) “Illinois primaries traditionally are held in March. But the General Assembly delayed the

2022 primary until June to give officials more time to incorporate 2020 census data into mandatory redistricting plans.” And there was Covid, reports the Daily Herald’s Russell Lissau.

☐ THE STATEWIDES

— [Factory reopening could save Belvidere, but many still bash the economy](#): “Autoworker strike and Biden administration secured return of more than 1,000 manufacturing jobs. But inflation still dominates public opinion,” by The Washington Post’s Jeanne Whalen.

— [6 Illinois high school activists will give young people a voice at global climate summit in Dubai](#), by the Tribune’s Adriana Pérez

☐ MIGRANT MOVES

— [State, food bank step in to keep migrants fed during December amid city contract delay](#), by the Tribune’s Dan Petrella and Nell Salzman

— **Union deal**: Gov. **JB Pritzker** has announced the state has come to an agreement with Iron Workers Local 1 “to ensure skilled iron workers will be present at the build site for new shelter space for asylum seekers.” The union had threatened to picket if non-union labor performed iron workers’ duties.

— [A plea to Biden from longtime undocumented immigrants in Chicago: ‘Please don’t forget about us, we need job permits too.’](#) by the Tribune’s Laura Rodríguez Presa

☐ CHICAGO

— [Mayor Brandon Johnson’s mental health plan in Chicago starts small but carries big political implications](#): The city faces challenges in opening up the first two clinics let alone expanding more broadly given nearly half of the budgeted positions at the Chicago Department of Public Health are already unfilled and “officials were unable to say how much money is being spent by different city departments on mental health care,” reports the Tribune’s Jake Sheridan.

— [Feds and city's inspector general eye Bally's casino deal](#): They're looking into the process by which Bally's won the Chicago casino license, "according to people familiar with the matter." Though no one's subpoenaed the mayor's office, and former Deputy Mayor Samir Mayekar expects it's "some casino industry actors and their allies who lost out on the bid who have spent the following years planting false rumors and innuendo in the media." Crain's Greg Hinz reports.

— [More on American and United wanting out of a deal to modernize Chicago O'Hare](#), via the View from the Wing's Gary Leff

— [Fire breaks out at historic Swift Mansion in Bronzeville](#), by the Tribune's Rebecca Johnson

— [City tows 263 cars on first day of winter parking ban](#), by the un-Times' Kade Heather

SPOTTED

— **Gov. JB Pritzker** was in Washington, D.C., Sunday for the Kennedy Center Honors. He was in a crowd of big political names, including President **Joe Biden**. The ceremony honored **Billy Crystal, Queen Latifah, Renée Fleming, Barry Gibb and Dionne Warwick**.

— **Hoops weekend**: Former Mayor **Lori Lightfoot** was spotted at the Loyola basketball game against Harvard on Saturday. Lightfoot said it was a big weekend of college and high school basketball. She attended the Chicago Elite Classic (boys high school) on Friday night, watched her daughter play high school ball Saturday morning, hit the Loyola game Saturday afternoon and went to the Elite Classic girls tournament Sunday. "This weekend shows how great basketball is in Chicago," she told Playbook.

— **Irish eyes**: More than 1,300 folks packed the annual Irish Fellowship Club's holiday party at the Hilton on Michigan Avenue on Friday. It was the largest gathering ever for this annual affair. Missing from the fun was former Ald. **Ed Burke**, who's attended every year for decades. He was, ahem, busy.

In the room: Union leader **Bob Reiter** held court as the party host. Seated at

the head table were Illinois House Speaker **Emanuel “Chris” Welch**, Senate President **Don Harmon**, Secretary of State **Alexi Giannoulias**, Cook County Board President **Toni Preckwinkle** and City Clerk **Anna Valencia**. Also in the crowd: Ald. **Walter Burnett Jr.**, former Ald. **Patrick Daley Thompson**, businessman **Jack Hartman**, nonprofit consultant **Kevin Conlon** and Buildings Commissioner **Matthew Beaudet**. Outgoing President **Robert Flood** was honored by club members. Local 130’s **Jim Coyne** was named president for the next year. And **Kathy Taylor** organized it all.

— **Who’s who fundraiser:** Ald. **Timmy Knudsen** (43rd) was feted at a fundraiser last week hosted by arts entrepreneur **Abby Pucker** at the Lincoln Park home of her parents, film producer **Gigi Pritzker** and investor **Michael Pucker**. Attendees included: philanthropist **Margot Pritzker**, corporate attorney **Langdon Neal**, Blackhawks Chair **Danny Wirtz**, Invenergy CEO **Michael Polsky**, World Business Chicago CEO **Michael Fassnacht**, insurance exec **Charles Smith**, Corporate Cleaning Services window-washing company CEO **Neal Zucker**, Terminal Getaway Spas CEO **Marko Iglendza**, Democratic Committeewoman **Lucy Moog**, developer **Dan McCaffery** and **Iris McCaffery**, BPOC healthcare equity firm founder **Ken O’Keefe**, marketing pro **Chloe Sacks** and Personal PAC CEO **Sarah Garza Resnick**.

— **State Rep. Lindsey LaPointe** headlined a Q&A with Rush Hospital President **Omar Lateef** at Larkin Hall for a discussion about the state of mental health in Illinois. Hosts: NAMI Chicago, which runs a mental health hotline, and the group’s CEO, **Alexa James**.

□ COOK COUNTY AND COLLARS

— [Suburban shoppers haven’t let rising costs slow their spending.](#) by the Daily Herald’s Jake Griffin

— [Waukegan High junior Victor Hinojosa is active on state and local school boards.](#) by the Lake County News-Sun’s Steve Sadin

□ DAY IN COURT

— [Father of slain Palestinian American boy files wrongful death lawsuit against landlord charged in attack.](#) by The Associated Press

— [Appeals court affirms conviction, sentence in Jussie Smollett case](#), by the Tribune's Madeline Buckley

☐ ...SWAMP THINGS...

— [Two months in prison for retired Chicago firefighter who helped with 'Tunnel' siege at U.S. Capitol](#): “Joseph Pavlik spent 33 years as a firefighter before retiring in 2013, prosecutors said. He went to the Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021, with a tactical vest, helmet, goggles, a gas mask and a can of chemical spray,” by the Sun-Times’ Jon Seidel.

☐ READER DIGEST

We asked for your holiday shopping motto:

Sara Acosta: “Try to be thoughtful, but when in doubt — Champagne!”

Denise Barreto: “If I can’t buy something you want, I can likely make you something you’ll appreciate.”

Randy Bukas: “Who do I write the check out to and for how much?”

Robert Christie: “Get ‘er done and have some fun.”

Graham Grady: “Shop early and often.”

Kevin Hall: “Take advantage of deals during Black Friday, Small Business Saturday and Cyber Monday. And try to be done with everything before Braggin' Rights.”

John Mark Hansen: “Everybody loves a good book (whether they know it or not).”

William Kresse: “Don't confuse Christmas shopping with Christmas buying. Buying is all about acquiring gifts. Shopping is about acquiring joy.”

David Melton: “Wait for the clearance sales.”

Gail Purkey: “Fuhgeddaboutit , because I really dislike Christmas shopping.”

Patricia Ann Watson: “Wait until after Jan. 1.”

For Tuesday, *when did you barely make a deadline?*

☐ THE NATIONAL TAKE

— [Trump’s revenge? GOP braces for daily blasts from ‘orange Jesus.’](#) by POLITICO’s Burgess Everett, Olivia Beavers and Meridith McGraw

— [White House pushes to pass stalled Ukraine aid,](#) by POLITICO’s Connor O’Brien

— [As the new chair of the Democratic Governors Association, Gov. Tim Walz has some tips for the party,](#) by POLITICO’s Elena Schneider

☐ TRIVIA

FRIDAY’s ANSWER: Congrats to **Lawrence Falbe** for correctly answering that the first self-sustaining, synthetic nuclear reaction occurred on a racquetball court at the University of Chicago in 1942.

TODAY’s QUESTION: *What renowned rock band sang about going to Chicago on their untitled 1971 album?* Email skapos@politico.com

☐ HAPPY BIRTHDAY

Chicago commissioner of the Mayor’s Office for People with Disabilities **Rachel Arfa**, first assistant Board of Review commissioner **Dan Balanoff**, political pollster and consultant **Rod McCulloch**, BDO senior counsel **Sarah Schanz** and restaurateur **Alpana Singh**.

-30-

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base=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.politico.com/settings](https://www.politico.com/_login?base=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.politico.com/settings)



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From: [Lacriola, Doreen](#)
To: [Steele, Brian](#); [Gonzales, Manny](#); [Hosinski, Catherine](#)
Subject: FYI - Chicago Tribune Commuter advocates: The CTA vows to double its rail operators this year. Its own data shows that's impossible. (Commuters Take Action)
Date: Thursday, January 11, 2024 7:25:30 AM

Morning! Please note – I'm still doing clips, I just wanted to make sure you saw this. Thanks!

Chicago Tribune

Commuter advocates: The CTA vows to double its rail operators this year. Its own data shows that's impossible.

By Nik Hunder and Christina Marfice Chicago Tribune

Published: Jan 11, 2024 at 5:00 am

<https://www.chicagotribune.com/opinion/commentary/ct-opinion-chicago-cta-impossible-train-rail-operators-20240111-i3c55dfisbbqjerqfua566pnl4-story.html>



CTA President Dorval Carter Jr. speaks with a train operator after riding the Yellow Line on Jan. 5, 2024, in Chicago, seven weeks after the Yellow Line reopened following a crash. (Stacey Wescott/Chicago Tribune)

At the [November meeting](#) of the Chicago Transit Board, CTA President Dorval Carter Jr. addressed public concerns about the staffing challenges that have contributed to a continuing decline in rail service and reliability since 2020 and a lofty goal under his proposed budget for 2024.

Carter said his staff gave him a plan that would “more than double the number of rail operators that we will have next year,” bringing the number of operators from 100 to 200.

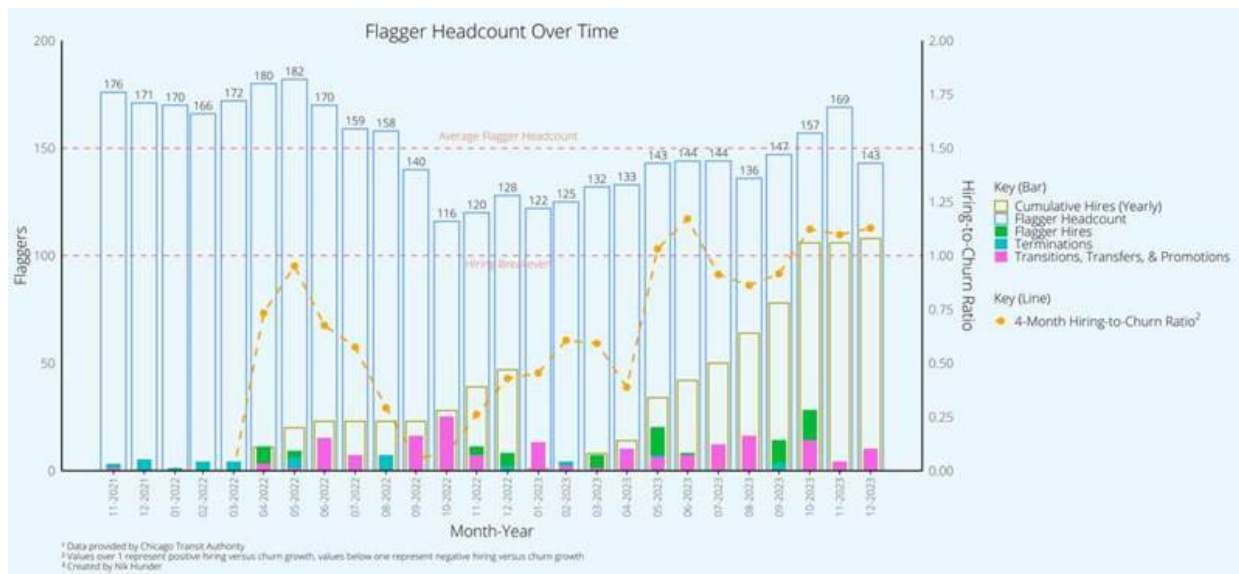
In early January, the Active Transportation Alliance published [an email](#) from the board, sent to community members and advocacy organizations that provided feedback on the rail operator shortage. Their email reiterates the CTA’s goal to double its training capacity from 100 rail operators to 200 this year.

However, the CTA’s own data reveals that the agency cannot meet this goal due to its current training requirements, recruitment and retention levels.

We used the Freedom of Information Act to request the number of flaggers the CTA has employed since November 2021 — plus how many flaggers were terminated, promoted, transitioned or transferred to other roles each month since then.

The CTA requires prospective rail operators to first spend at least 12 months working as flaggers. According to the CTA, working as a flagger helps future rail operators learn essential safety procedures and fundamental skills. After 12 months of service, flaggers become eligible to enroll in rail operator training classes. The CTA may be able to work with the Amalgamated Transit Union to waive the 12-month flagger requirement — or shorten it — but agency leaders have repeatedly said they are against doing so for safety reasons. Most recently, Carter [confirmed at the November board meeting](#) that he plans to keep the 12-month requirement in place.

This means that in order to put 200 employees into rail operator training classes in 2024, the CTA needed to have a minimum of 200 flaggers employed by Dec. 31, 2023. In December, there were 143 flaggers working at the CTA. This makes it mathematically impossible for the agency to fill 200 rail operator training slots this year.



CTA flagger head count over time. Data provided by the CTA. (Nik Hunder/Hand)

To make matters worse, the CTA is not recruiting flaggers fast enough to keep up with how many it claims it will enroll in rail operator training classes — plus the number it loses each month due to terminations, promotions, transitions and transfers. Based on a four-month average of its hiring-to-churn ratio, the CTA was gaining net 1.13 flaggers per month as of December. At that rate, the agency would be on track to increase its flagger head count by about 13 — for a total of 156 — in 2024.

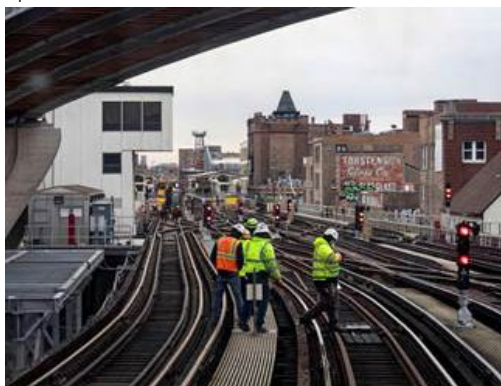
At this growth rate, it would take the CTA until May 2025 to gain enough new flaggers to fill just one rail operator training class without reducing its overall flagger head count. The only way for the CTA to keep enough flaggers to support day-to-day operations and fill all the training classes it has planned is to hire a lot more flaggers — and quickly.

But since at least Nov. 1, the CTA has not posted any job listings for flaggers [on its website](#). Between Nov. 1 and Dec. 31, the agency hired only two new flaggers — and lost 18 to terminations, promotions, transfers and role transitions.

That's the other disheartening side of the CTA's flagger workforce data: attrition.

The CTA lost more flaggers than it gained in 2023 — 133 were fired, promoted, transferred or transitioned to other roles, while only 108 were hired.

Rather than restart the 12-month clock each time an experienced flagger leaves, the CTA needs to better support its hardworking workforce. Flaggers should not feel like they need to leave their positions because of poor working conditions so they can pursue higher-quality positions. The sooner the CTA can stop flaggers from leaving, the sooner the agency can actually train 200 new rail operators.



CTA workers walk along Red, Purple and Brown "L" tracks near the Belmont station on Nov. 29, 2021. (Brian Cassella/Chicago Tribune)

Chicago's transit riders continue to face a struggling system with a dysfunctional president who deflects blame, [misrepresents data, rarely rides the system](#) and hasn't given a public news conference since December 2022. The board [refuses to hold him accountable](#) and instead praises his performance and [regularly raises his pay](#) — all while the CTA falls further into crisis.

And now the CTA is promising Chicagoans progress it simply cannot achieve.

Over the last few years, we've become used to a CTA whose leadership dodges transparency and obfuscates the truth. But promising to train 200 rail operators this year without nearly enough employees to do so is an astounding act of deception, even for the CTA.

It should never take a FOIA request to get to the truth behind a public agency's intentions. This deceit shows how far CTA leaders — including Carter — are willing to go to hide the true state of the system and try to get a rightly concerned public off their backs, even temporarily.

But Chicagoans deserve — and will find — the truth. The CTA is too important to let fail.

Nik Hunder and Christina Marfice are organizers with Commuters Take Action, a collective of frustrated Chicago commuters. Submit a letter, of no more than 400 words, to the editor [here](#) or email letters@chicagotribune.com.

From: [Lacriola, Doreen](#)
To: [Steele, Brian](#); [Hosinski, Catherine](#); [Gonzales, Manny](#)
Subject: FYI - The moment met the CTA - Chicago Reader
Date: Tuesday, November 28, 2023 1:27:46 PM

Chicago Reader

The moment met the CTA

The CTA's Meeting the Moment plan marked a renewed effort to fill hundreds of vacancies reportedly left by the pandemic—but data shows new hires aren't digging the agency out of its staffing shortages.

by Reema Saleh November 28, 2023

<https://chicagoreader.com/news-politics/cta-chicago-staffing-shortage/>



More than 50 people protest outside CTA headquarters on October 13 to demand better serviceCredit: Reema Saleh

When the Chicago Transit Authority (CTA) first announced its [Meeting the Moment action plan](#) last year, workforce and service delivery issues were at the forefront. Officials pointed to the “[Great Resignation](#)” as creating an unusually competitive job market, leading to high attrition rates among bus and rail operators. Mass resignations during the pandemic, along with an [aging workforce](#) on average ten years older than the rest of American workers, contributed to existing attrition rates, which lingered and compounded into a crisis.

Like President Dorval Carter [stated](#) last year in front of the City Council: the exodus is far from over. “We’re now hiring at the same level of people that we were at before the pandemic. . . . The problem is I’ve got to stop the hemorrhaging on the other side,” Carter said.

“The days of simply posting a ‘Now Hiring’ notice are long gone,” announced [Meeting the Moment](#), which included new recruitment strategies for replenishing the CTA’s declining workforce—the [biggest obstacle](#) to delivering reliable and frequent service. The CTA says it has doubled down on its hiring efforts this year, chipping away at the [1,000 vacancies](#) Carter said were left by the

pandemic.

Since the CTA [first announced Meeting the Moment](#), it increased starting wages and partnered with Olive-Harvey College to help job candidates obtain a commercial learner's permit, the first step to working as a bus operator. To recruit more bus drivers, the CTA abandoned its previous approach of enlisting full-time employees from its existing pool of part-timers and began hiring full-time workers directly.

Entry-level roles saw [hourly wage increases](#) and hiring bonuses to compete with the private sector. This year alone, the CTA hosted nearly a dozen in-person and virtual job fairs to advertise entry-level roles and help attendees successfully apply. To track its progress, the CTA unveiled public scorecards for the first time—releasing data on performance metrics that show its progress toward regaining riders, increasing reliability, and closing employment gaps.

However, a *Chicago Reader* analysis of data from the [Meeting the Moment Scorecard](#) through November indicates less promising results. A closer look shows the CTA's worker shortage has stayed long past the pandemic's onset.

The CTA has lost both bus and rail workers since the pandemic. The number of bus operators began to rise in 2023, but the CTA has continued to lose rail operators—showing little signs of recovery.

In 2020, the CTA saw a steady exodus of workers, one that still lingers. The agency took its worst losses in 2022—months after the pandemic exacted the brunt of its impact on Chicago. In the three years since the pandemic began, the CTA workforce lost 14 percent of bus and 16 percent of rail operators.

Among transit agencies, the CTA is not alone in its workforce attrition problems. A [2022 survey](#) by the American Public Transportation Association found that 96 percent of United States public transit agencies are experiencing a workforce shortage and 84 percent say these challenges are affecting their ability to provide service.

In [New York](#), [Los Angeles](#), and [Miami](#), workforce shortages led to diminished or delayed service—like [the 71 percent](#) of U.S. transit agencies that reported doing so that year. Amid a [national shortfall](#) of transit operators years in the making, the CTA had company going into its pandemic-induced staffing shortages.

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“Going together with this business, it becomes a very vicious cycle. If you do not have enough operators, then you're unable to provide service. You can justify it now because the ridership is not high, but you still are obligated to provide the same frequency of service in order to attract the rider back,” said P.S. Sriraj, director of the University of Illinois Chicago's Urban Transportation Center. “If you don't have the operators, then you put up a schedule and it doesn't show up in reality, and then people start worrying about the reliability of the service. But this, in turn, is going to keep people away from the service.”



Frustrated with service cuts, Commuters Take Action protests outside CTA headquarters to demand more reliable schedules and new leadership. Credit: Reema Saleh

With short-staffed crews and fewer operators who could fill in behind the wheel when someone calls in sick, the CTA was left without [enough workers](#) to deliver scheduled service [reliably](#). The CTA frames its staffing shortages [as a pandemic shock](#) it's recovering from, along with a tight labor market affecting the whole industry.

"Many people took early retirement during the pandemic, mainly because of the worry that they had about their well-being in the line of duty. The opportunities in other sectors were also very attractive, and that made it easier for them to forego this opportunity," Sriraj added.

In addition to a wave of retirements that hit the CTA during the pandemic, CTA spokesperson Kathleen Woodruff pointed to [industry-level shifts](#) across the country, which have encouraged CTA employees to join the private sector.

"The private market has also proven to be a strong competitor for bus operators. The CDL (Commercial Driver's License) is a highly marketable certification. CTA bus operators are often recruited by package delivery companies, logistics companies, and school districts to help fill voids they too are experiencing in qualified candidates," Woodruff said.

But these staffing shortages are still happening—an ongoing problem that hit harder in 2022 than at the onset of the pandemic. As we approach 2024, the CTA is making progress toward replenishing its workforce, but it is still far from pre-pandemic levels.

CTA officials announced they hired [more than 700](#) new bus operators since the start of 2023, surpassing their year-end goal of 700. But closer examination shows the CTA also lost 357 employees through September due to "separations"—layoffs, terminations, and resignations. An additional 36 bus operators transferred to other divisions, leaving vacancies behind. Altogether, separations and transfers account for nearly 60 percent of rail employees hired by the CTA this year—bringing the

number of new bus operators down to a net 338.

For much of 2022, the CTA lost more bus workers than it gained. While the CTA stepped up recruitment efforts, it appears to have had difficulties filling the gaps left behind. Whether long-time workers leave before they're replaced or new hires quit entry-level roles, the CTA has struggled to grow over the past few years.

The CTA budgeted 3,707 full-time bus operators for 2023. Despite an emphasis on hiring, the agency has yet to fill remaining vacancies.

"For the most part, they're reaching their target for hiring bus operators, but that's still almost certainly not going to be enough to run pre-pandemic service, which is what we obviously want to see because there are cities all over North America that have seen their transit ridership return to pre-pandemic levels because they invested in service and operators," said David Powe, Active Transportation Alliance's director of planning and technical assistance.

The CTA has yet to announce an official recruitment goal for rail operators as they have for bus operators. But the Meeting the Moment scorecard shows struggles in growing the division. As of September, the CTA hired 175 new rail workers. But, when accounting for 2023's separations and transfers, the CTA's rail division netted only 20 employees.

Filled rail operator positions remain well below what the CTA budgeted for 2023. As of September, 721 rail operators worked at the agency, though it budgeted for 839.

Rail operator training classes took place five times in 2023 and five times the year before, according to documents from the CTA. In 2021, the agency held two classes. Each class is capped at 20 employees, limiting the number of people who can join the workforce. Previously, the agency capped classes at 16.

Increased class sizes led to onboarding an additional 20 rail operators this year. The CTA also brought back nine retired instructors this year to train new hires and current workers, who require recertification every two years.

"The hiring and training for rail operators is a far more complex process and simply cannot be expedited," Woodruff said. "Rail operators get the most extensive training of any CTA position, given the nature of their duties and of operating complex machinery."

As part of the training process, new employees must first join as a flagger, a full-time, temporary position that pays a starting wage of about \$21 per hour. Since new hires typically lack necessary experience, working as a flagger allows employees to build knowledge on the job. After working as a flagger for multiple months, they can apply for other positions within the division. Additionally, the [small size](#) of the rail cars limits how many people can be trained in a rail car at once.

"Each operator trainee who serves as a flagger has been thoroughly trained on right-of-way safety, rail operations, and system communications with our control center. This training and experience in railroad operations are prerequisites for the job—a standard that must not be compromised as it

allows CTA to maintain the highest quality of safety standards for customers and employees,” Woodruff said.

“Other cities—like New York, Washington, D.C., or San Francisco—are running more rail service than ever. There’s no need for Chicago to be falling behind.”

Active Transportation Alliance and Commuters Take Action, two transportation advocacy groups in Chicago, argue the training schedule has created persistent bottlenecks in the onboarding process and contributed to the CTA’s rail operator shortage. Without scaling up the CTA’s training capacity, they believe that post-pandemic service cuts will become the norm.

“We’re pushing CTA to increase capacity so they can train 300 rail operators a year, so they can start adding rail service as soon as possible,” Powe said.

The City Council recently approved the agency’s \$1.99 billion [operating budget](#) for 2024, a 9 percent increase from this year. Both organizations are pushing the CTA to increase the number of classes and class sizes next year to increase its capacity and avoid further service cuts.

“Since 2019, the CTA’s rail service has been cut by 24 percent, primarily due to the agency’s inability to hire and retain rail operators,” said Commuters Take Action’s Brandon McFadden. “The 2024 budget fails to outline any specific steps that the agency is planning to take to increase the headcount.

According to Woodruff, the agency is currently discussing plans to further expand rail training in 2024. These details will be finalized by the year’s end.

Like many transit agencies across the country, the CTA is adjusting to “a new normal”—charting out a new post-pandemic future for services across the city. Since the pandemic started, the agency’s workforce has been making do with less. This fall, the CTA has seen additional service cuts. According to the [Chicago Tribune](#), CTA’s scheduled bus and rail service will be down roughly 15 percent this year compared to 2019.

Without filling vacant positions, service is unlikely to return to pre-pandemic levels—a situation that Commuters Take Action [characterizes](#) as a 24 percent cut on rail, with regular unreliability after that.

“As the budget exists today, it contains . . . 2019 staffing levels but no outline for increases in rail operator training throughput, leading us to believe the status quo will be maintained through the new year. Without an increase in training classes, natural attrition will prevent CTA from reaching those staffing goals,” McFadden said.

The CTA workforce has not recovered from its pandemic losses; it is still in the same dire situation it was during the height of the pandemic. If COVID-19 sparked retention problems, these shortages have lingered long after, as positions the CTA budgeted remain unfilled.

“Without an overhauled hiring process and focus on improving employee retention, the agency rail service will continue to stagnate. It’s fair to say that the future success of the agency, and even the city of Chicago, rests on the CTA’s ability to hire just over 100 people,” said Commuters Take Action’s

Fabio Göttlicher. “Other cities—like New York, Washington, D.C., or San Francisco—are running more rail service than ever. There’s no need for Chicago to be falling behind.

From: [Steele, Brian](#)
To: [Morgan, April](#)
Subject: FYI--letter to the editor RE: Commuters" analysis of flagger hiring
Date: Tuesday, January 16, 2024 4:03:00 PM
Attachments: [Commuters Take Action LTE Tribune Response FINAL 011524.docx](#)

Good afternoon.

FYI that we have submitted the attached LTE in response to last week's [oped](#) from the Commuters' group.

Happy to answer any questions.

Thank you.

Letter to the Editor
Chicago Tribune
1/15/24

While we appreciate a recent commentary about the very important issue of filling Rail Operator positions to improve train service in Chicago, the commentary drew incorrect conclusions and misstated a few facts (“Commuter advocates: The CTA vows to double rail operator trainees this year. Its data shows that’s impossible”, Jan. 11, 2024).

Contrary to suggestions in the commentary, CTA fills the ranks of flaggers—the steppingstone to becoming a rail operator—from both internal candidates and external applicants. Internal candidates are given priority for flagger vacancies, in keeping with our collective bargaining agreement with our union, which calls for the positions to be offered to existing CTA rail employees first. CTA most recently took applicants for the flagger position in October and November last year and received over 800 applications. Many of those successful applicants are now filling our Flagger ranks. CTA will further augment that hiring with a [career fair](#) aimed at flagger candidates later this month.

In 2023, we started the year with 128 flaggers. Throughout the year, we hired 159 flaggers to replace those who were completing training and becoming rail operators (nearly 90 last year) or leaving for other reasons. At the end of the year, we had 142 flaggers. This is a normal process. Also, while Rail Operators must first serve as flaggers, they start rail operator training based on seniority, not after 12 months as claimed.

Why are flaggers the best path to becoming a rail operator? Flaggers are thoroughly trained on right-of-way safety, rail operations, and system communications. This training and experience in railroad operations are an important prerequisite for becoming a rail operator--a standard that allows us to maintain the highest safety standards for both riders and employees. CTA will not compromise safety for expediency.

The framework we have in place will provide more than enough flaggers to meet our training goal of 200 operators—which we have also supported by increasing the size of our training classes from 12 to 20. And when those flaggers become operators, we have a large pool of customer-service assistants ready to backfill vacant flagger spots. Hiring is a holistic process, not solely defined by numbers on one category.

As we have done with bus hiring—last year we hired 1,000 new bus operators, more than at any time in CTA history—we will make similar progress on the rail side. And to make sure the new operators get the comprehensive training they need, we’ve trained a new class of rail instructors to handle the increased instruction demand and brought back retired rail instructors to help.

The data analysis in the commentary may have been well-intended, but unfortunately was incomplete and painted an inaccurate picture. Using data to draw conclusions, without understanding context of the numbers, only leads to an incorrect narrative.

DRAFT – For Planning

We recognize there is more work to be done to strengthen our Rail Operator workforce. We are making progress, and we're fully committed to that goal—and will continue to keep the public informed on our progress at transitchicago.com/performance

(signed)

Dorval R. Carter, Jr.

President

CTA

From: [Gonzales, Manny](#)
To: [Lacriola, Doreen](#); [Steele, Brian](#); [Hosinski, Catherine](#)
Subject: RE: FYI - Chicago Tribune Commuter advocates: The CTA vows to double its rail operators this year. Its own data shows that's impossible. (Commuters Take Action)
Date: Thursday, January 11, 2024 8:09:55 AM

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The CTA requires prospective rail operators to first spend at **least 12 months working as flaggers**. According to the CTA, working as a flagger helps future rail operators learn essential safety procedures and fundamental skills. After 12 months of service, flaggers become eligible to enroll in rail operator training classes. The CTA may be able to work with the Amalgamated Transit Union to waive the 12-month flagger requirement — or shorten it — but agency leaders have repeatedly said they are against doing so for safety reasons. Most recently, Carter [confirmed at the November board meeting](#) that he plans to keep the 12-month requirement in place.

From: Lacriola, Doreen <Dlacriola@transitchicago.com>
Sent: Thursday, January 11, 2024 7:25 AM
To: Steele, Brian <bsteale@transitchicago.com>; Gonzales, Manny <MGonzales@transitchicago.com>; Hosinski, Catherine <CHosinski@transitchicago.com>
Subject: FYI - Chicago Tribune Commuter advocates: The CTA vows to double its rail operators this year. Its own data shows that's impossible. (Commuters Take Action)

Morning! Please note – I'm still doing clips, I just wanted to make sure you saw this. Thanks!

Chicago Tribune

Commuter advocates: The CTA vows to double its rail operators this year. Its own data shows that's impossible.

By Nik Hunder and Christina Marfice Chicago Tribune

Published: Jan 11, 2024 at 5:00 am

<https://www.chicagotribune.com/opinion/commentary/ct-opinion-chicago-cta-impossible-train-rail-operators-20240111-i3c55dfisbbqjrqfua566pnl4-story.html>



CTA President Dorval Carter Jr. speaks with a train operator after riding the Yellow Line on Jan. 5, 2024, in Chicago, seven weeks after the Yellow Line reopened following a crash. (Stacey Wescott/Chicago Tribune)

At the [November meeting](#) of the Chicago Transit Board, CTA President Dorval Carter Jr. addressed public concerns about the staffing challenges that have contributed to a continuing decline in rail service and reliability since 2020 and a lofty goal under his proposed budget for 2024.

Carter said his staff gave him a plan that would “more than double the number of rail operators that we will have next year,” bringing the number of operators from 100 to 200.

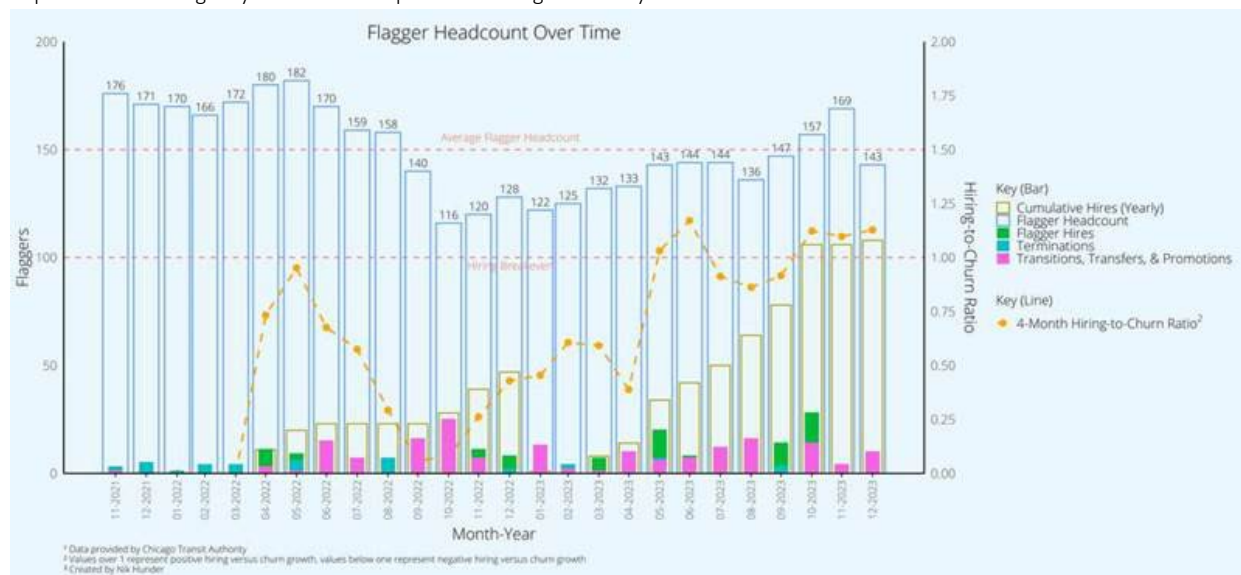
In early January, the Active Transportation Alliance published [an email](#) from the board, sent to community members and advocacy organizations that provided feedback on the rail operator shortage. Their email reiterates the CTA's goal to double its training capacity from 100 rail operators to 200 this year.

However, the CTA's own data reveals that the agency cannot meet this goal due to its current training requirements, recruitment and retention levels.

We used the Freedom of Information Act to request the number of flaggers the CTA has employed since November 2021 — plus how many flaggers were terminated, promoted, transitioned or transferred to other roles each month since then.

The CTA requires prospective rail operators to first spend at least 12 months working as flaggers. According to the CTA, working as a flagger helps future rail operators learn essential safety procedures and fundamental skills. After 12 months of service, flaggers become eligible to enroll in rail operator training classes. The CTA may be able to work with the Amalgamated Transit Union to waive the 12-month flagger requirement — or shorten it — but agency leaders have repeatedly said they are against doing so for safety reasons. Most recently, Carter [confirmed at the November board meeting](#) that he plans to keep the 12-month requirement in place.

This means that in order to put 200 employees into rail operator training classes in 2024, the CTA needed to have a minimum of 200 flaggers employed by Dec. 31, 2023. In December, there were 143 flaggers working at the CTA. This makes it mathematically impossible for the agency to fill 200 rail operator training slots this year.



CTA flagger head count over time. Data provided by the CTA. (Nik Hunder/Hand)

To make matters worse, the CTA is not recruiting flaggers fast enough to keep up with how many it claims it will enroll in rail operator training classes — plus the number it loses each month due to terminations, promotions, transitions and transfers. Based on a four-month average of its hiring-to-churn ratio, the CTA was gaining net 1.13 flaggers per month as of December. At that rate, the agency would be on track to increase its flagger head count by about 13 — for a total of 156 — in 2024.

At this growth rate, it would take the CTA until May 2025 to gain enough new flaggers to fill just one rail operator training class without reducing its overall flagger head count. The only way for the CTA to keep enough flaggers to support day-to-day operations and fill all the training classes it has planned is to hire a lot more flaggers — and quickly.

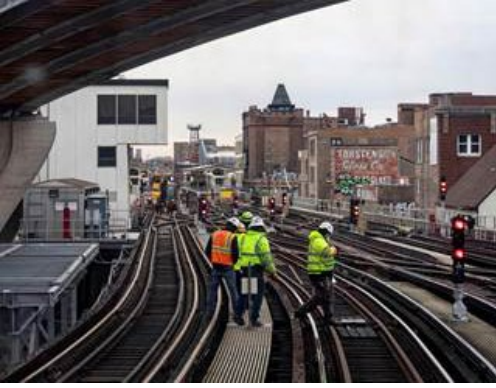
But since at least Nov. 1, the CTA has not posted any job listings for flaggers [on its website](#). Between Nov. 1 and Dec. 31, the agency hired only two new flaggers — and lost 18 to terminations, promotions, transfers and role transitions.

That's the other disheartening side of the CTA's flagger workforce data: attrition.

The CTA lost more flaggers than it gained in 2023 — 133 were fired, promoted, transferred or transitioned to other roles, while only 108 were hired.

Rather than restart the 12-month clock each time an experienced flagger leaves, the CTA needs to better support its hardworking workforce. Flaggers should not feel like they need to leave their positions because of poor working conditions so they can pursue higher-quality positions. The sooner the CTA can stop flaggers from leaving, the sooner the agency can actually train 200 new rail

operators.



CTA workers walk along Red, Purple and Brown "L" tracks near the Belmont station on Nov. 29, 2021. (Brian Cassella/Chicago Tribune)

Chicago's transit riders continue to face a struggling system with a dysfunctional president who deflects blame, [misrepresents data, rarely rides the system](#) and hasn't given a public news conference since December 2022. The board [refuses to hold him accountable](#) and instead praises his performance and [regularly raises his pay](#) — all while the CTA falls further into crisis.

And now the CTA is promising Chicagoans progress it simply cannot achieve.

Over the last few years, we've become used to a CTA whose leadership dodges transparency and obfuscates the truth. But promising to train 200 rail operators this year without nearly enough employees to do so is an astounding act of deception, even for the CTA.

It should never take a FOIA request to get to the truth behind a public agency's intentions. This deceit shows how far CTA leaders — including Carter — are willing to go to hide the true state of the system and try to get a rightly concerned public off their backs, even temporarily.

But Chicagoans deserve — and will find — the truth. The CTA is too important to let fail.

Nik Hunder and Christina Marfice are organizers with Commuters Take Action, a collective of frustrated Chicago commuters. Submit a letter, of no more than 400 words, to the editor [here](#) or email letters@chicagotribune.com.

From: [Gonzales, Manny](#)
To: [Woodruff, Kathleen](#); [Media Relations Dept](#)
Subject: Re: President Carter's Rail Operator Training Plan
Date: Thursday, January 18, 2024 5:59:18 PM

Hunder wrote an op ed in the Tribune that DRC called out as factually inaccurate 7(1)(f)

7(1)(f)

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Not Responsive - No Keywords - Also 7(1)(f) Exempt

From: Nik Hunder <nikhunder@gmail.com>
Sent: Thursday, January 18, 2024 3:59 PM
To: Board Office <BoardOffice@transitchicago.com>
Cc: Christina Marfice <Christinamarfice@gmail.com>; Commuters Take Action <commuterstakeaction@gmail.com>; CTA Media <CTAMedia@transitchicago.com>
Subject: President Carter's Rail Operator Training Plan

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Good afternoon,

This morning I attended and made public comment at the board meeting. In rebuttal to my comments and an op-ed that Christina Marfice and I authored, during his President's report, President Carter called the report inaccurate and stated we had made an ill-informed conclusion but offered no proof of inaccuracy. We have found it difficult to achieve transparency with the CTA. But if we made a mistake, we would like to know so we can correct the public understanding of this issue.

At ~1:46:10 of the November board meeting. President Carter referred to a plan he requested from

his staff on how to train 200 rail operators. Can CTA please provide us with a copy of that plan?

I have submitted a FOIA request for it, but obtaining information this way is an unhealthy way for public advocates to interact with a government agency.

I look forward to reviewing a copy of this request so there are no further discrepancies between the public and CTA's understanding of this issue.

Best,
Nik

NIK HUNDER LEED GREEN ASSOC.

Policy Analyst/Researcher

CHIRP Radio DJ

(440) 600-4413

he/him

From: McKone, Tom <tmckone@transitchicago.com>

Sent: Wednesday, January 24, 2024 9:01 AM

To: Steele, Brian <bstele@transitchicago.com>; Barreto, Denise <DBarreto@transitchicago.com>; Leerhsen, Nora <nleerhsen@transitchicago.com>; Poppe, Molly <MPoppe@transitchicago.com>

Subject: RE: President Carter's Rail Operator Training Plan

We addressed the flagger hiring issue in the op-ed response. These numbers still stand:

We started 2023 with 128 flaggers. Throughout the year, we hired 159 flaggers to replace those who were completing training and becoming rail operators (nearly 90 last year) or leaving for other reasons. At the end of the year, we had 142 flaggers.

7(1)(f)

Tom

Not Responsive - No Keywords - Also 7(1)(f) Exempt

Not Responsive - No Keywords - Also 7(1)(f) Exempt

From: Nik Hunder <nikhunder@gmail.com>

Sent: Tuesday, January 23, 2024 2:25 PM

To: Board Office <BoardOffice@transitchicago.com>

Cc: Christina Marfice <Christinamarfice@gmail.com>; Commuters Take Action <commuterstakeaction@gmail.com>; CTA Media <CTAMedia@transitchicago.com>

Subject: Re: President Carter's Rail Operator Training Plan

Some people who received this message don't often get email from nikhunder@gmail.com. [Learn why this is important](#)

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Hi there,

I wanted to check in to see if this email was received successfully. I received a confirmation for another inquiry I made with the board and didn't want this one to go unnoticed. As noted at the last board meeting, President Carter and Commuters Take Action share a stance that both parties are needed to successfully communicate about the status of the CTA so we can help broadcast the positive steps CTA is taking.

Thank you,
Nik

NIK HUNDER LEED GREEN ASSOC.

Policy Analyst/Researcher

CHIRP Radio DJ

(440) 600-4413

he/him

On Thu, Jan 18, 2024 at 3:59 PM Nik Hunder <nikhunder@gmail.com> wrote:

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Best,
Nik

NIK HUNDER LEED GREEN ASSOC.

Policy Analyst/Researcher

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