Reparative Infrastructure: How Illinois Rewrote the Moral Math of Transit

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> *The true test of a nation isn't what it paves. It's who it moves.*

The Number That Wouldn't Let Go

I joined the Chicago Transit Authority in July 2023 with one number already fixed in my mind: 50%. That number was Illinois' statutory farebox recovery ratio requirement, a mandate that CTA, Metra, and Pace collectively generate at least 50% of their operating costs through passenger fares.[1] No other transit system in the United States faces a requirement of this magnitude or with this level of financial consequence if unmet. In peer cities, Boston's MBTA, Washington's WMATA, New York's MTA, farebox recovery hovers between 20 and 28 percent. In Illinois, the law demanded more than double that.

That gap is not a technicality. It is a structural punishment baked into state law. At the time, CTA was carrying approximately 86% of the region's transit riders while receiving only about 46% of the region's transit operating funding.[2] The math was not complicated: the system serving the most people, in the densest and most transit-dependent communities, was receiving the least proportional support.

And because those communities are disproportionately Black and low-income, the funding formula was not merely inefficient — it was inequitable by design.

My team started saying this out loud. In every room. At every hearing. For months. Not as an accusation - as a fact. The farebox recovery rate is uniquely high. Our peer cities are at 20–28%. We are at 50%. That is not a funding problem. That is a structural flaw. The first act of repair was naming it correctly.

Racism as Infrastructure Policy

The inequity embedded in Illinois transit funding did not emerge in a vacuum. Research consistently documents that public infrastructure investment in the United States has followed racial geography - highways routed through Black neighborhoods, commuter rail bypassing working-class communities of color, broadband, and clean energy corridors stalled where poverty ran deepest.[3] These were not oversights. They were decisions.

The consequences compound over time. Citigroup's 2020 analysis estimated that racial inequity cost the U.S. $16 trillion in lost GDP between 2000 and 2020[4] - and that closing those gaps could add another $5 trillion in five years. Infrastructure disinvestment is a primary transmission mechanism for that loss. When communities cannot access jobs, healthcare, and education because their transit systems are chronically underfunded, that is not a mobility failure. It is an economic one.

In the Chicago region, the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP) documented that Black residents face the longest commute times in the region, while white residents face the shortest.[5] The communities with the most transit-dependent populations – Austin, North Lawndale, Englewood, the South and West Sides - received the least reliable service and the least political attention in the funding debate.

Racism isn't just a moral failure in public infrastructure. It is an engineering flaw. It is a pipeline-to-nowhere failure; and like any structural defect, it can be redesigned – but, only if you're willing to name the design.

The Methodology: What Reparative Infrastructure Actually Looks Like

In the early morning hours of October 31, 2025, the Illinois General Assembly passed S.B. 2111 – a $1.5 Billion transit funding and reform package that the Governor signed into law on December 16, 2025. It was the most transformative piece of transit legislation in 50 years.

Five structural interventions define what makes this reform reparative rather than merely responsive:

1. A human-equity funding formula that directs operating dollars to the people and places most dependent on transit — correcting the 86/46 disparity directly.
2. Modernized farebox recovery rules aligned with peer city systems, eliminating the punishing 50% statutory requirement that harmed low-income riders most.
3. Flexible road-fund dollars for transit, ending the false binary between highway investment and people-centered mobility.

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4. Transit-oriented development tools enabling agencies to generate revenue through community investment — as systems in Hong Kong, Paris, and Copenhagen have done for decades.
5. The Northern Illinois Transit Authority (NITA), a new regional coordinating body to align service accountability and safety across the six-county region.

Taken together, these five interventions constitute what this piece names as a reparative infrastructure framework — one that treats public investment not as a neutral technical exercise but as a mechanism for correcting historically embedded harm. The scholarly literature documents transit equity frameworks and need-based distribution models.[6] But reparative infrastructure makes a harder, more directional claim: that there was harm, there is a debt, and the investment is the correction. When that becomes the operating principle and not an afterthought - every dollar spent multiplies opportunity instead of compounding disparity.

How Power Actually Moves: Two Moments from Inside

Policy papers document what was passed. They rarely document what made it possible. That is the contribution of this piece. Coalition architecture - the actual work of moving lawmakers - is built on narrative transfer and power comprehension. Two moments illustrate what that looks like in practice.

Moment One: The Message Transfers (April 2024)

April 2024. A revenue committee hearing in Springfield. The chair of the committee was Representative Rita Mayfield – a Black woman from Lake County, a collar county that does not receive heavy CTA service and had every political reason to center suburban priorities.

She opened the hearing and repeated our talking points back. Not summarized. Not paraphrased. The argument - word for word, with confidence that Illinois' farebox recovery requirement was uniquely punishing and amounted to geographic equity more than human equity, serving no one well, noting that peer systems operated at half our recovery rate. She had internalized it. She owned it.

That is the moment I knew. When the message lives in someone else's mouth – in a legislator who has no obvious reason to carry it – you have won something you cannot undo. Advocacy becomes infrastructure when it transfers.

Moment Two: The Napkin (July 26, 2024)

July 26, 2024. We had just come out of a meeting with Senate President Don Harmon. It had gone well by every measure; substantive conversation, genuine engagement but still no clear commitment. And meanwhile, the ongoing Senate transportation committee hearings were brutal. The political pressure was coming from every direction and CTA kept absorbing it.

When my team asked how I thought the meeting went, I told them the truth: terrible. And then – not realizing the window to Harmon's building was open – I went on a full tirade about being exhausted with doing the structural analysis that lawmakers had the power to simply decide to fix.

His chief of staff heard me prompting the Senate president to pull us back in. He said he loved “the meeting after the meeting.” So I leaned over that conference table and, on the back of a napkin, I showed him something I had been saying in polished presentations for months but stripped this time of everything except the math. Senator Harmon, I told him, if you do nothing else today, if you change nothing but the current funding formula, you correct most of this problem. And right there, using only the dollars already in the existing budget, I redrew the distribution.

He looked at it and said: “If you're underfunded, then who's overfunded?” I didn't answer. I wasn't going to be the Black woman from CTA pointing fingers at Metra and Pace. But he had named it himself.

He had arrived at the structural reality through his own reasoning. The formula had always told that story, it just needed a moment where power was willing to read it.

That is power comprehension. It cannot be manufactured. It has to be created through sustained relationships, patient repetition, and sometimes a candid moment through an open window on a hot summer day.

The Formula Was Proven Before We Passed the Bill

One detail that rarely appears in public discussion of the Illinois reform deserves attention, because it is the reason this piece doesn’t claim Illinois invented reparative transit infrastructure - only that it formalized what had already been demonstrated.

Between 2020 and 2021, three tranches of federal COVID emergency relief funds were distributed across CTA, Metra, and Pace. The first, the CARES Act, used the traditional formula: 58% CTA, 34% Metra, 8% Pace, based on a capital funding split established in 1983. The second – the CRRSAA model – broke from that precedent. The RTA developed a new methodology based on transit Critical Need Areas (CNAs), weighting distribution by actual ridership propensity, regional equity, and high-mobility industry presence. Under that formula, CTA received 77%, Metra 18%, and Pace 5% - a distribution that more accurately reflected who was actually riding and who most depended on the system. The RTA Board approved this allocation on March 18, 2021, following a public comment period. The third tranche - the ARP Act - reverted: 61% CTA, 34% Metra, 5% Pace. Suburban agencies and collar county governments had objected strenuously to the equity-based distribution, submitting public comments arguing it set a dangerous precedent and punished fiscally responsible agencies for having reduced service.

But precedent had been set. The regional governing body –not CTA– had demonstrated that a need-based distribution was technically feasible, fiscally manageable, and more accurate. That the third tranche reverted under political pressure doesn’t erase what the second tranche proved. It only confirmed that the fight over the formula was never technical. It was always political. When we walked into those legislative conversations in 2024, we weren’t asking lawmakers to imagine something untested. We were reminding them of something the RTA Board had already voted to do. That is what ‘the formula is proven’ means. Not a theoretical claim. A documented one.[9]

What Illinois Demands of the Nation

Federal infrastructure dollars from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and the Inflation Reduction Act remain in active distribution.[7] Those dollars will either replicate yesterday's inequities or build tomorrow's fairness. The difference lies entirely in the metrics applied: Who receives the contracts? Where do new lines run? Which communities gain access to jobs, cleaner air, and shorter commutes?

Philadelphia[8] and New York City have both initiated racial equity budget frameworks in recent years; evidence that other major jurisdictions are grappling with the same design challenge Illinois just addressed in transit.[9] The question is not whether reparative infrastructure is possible. Illinois, and before it the COVID equity distribution, have answered that. The question is whether political will can be built (and sustained) to apply the framework consistently.

That will does not build itself. It requires what Illinois required: an undeniable narrative, an unlikely coalition, and budget fluency that no one else in the room has. Those are not strategic accidents. They are replicable moves.

This piece is not a victory lap. Illinois still has implementation work ahead. NITA is under construction. The equity formula must be operationalized, not just legislated. The communities that have been most harmed - the South and West Sides, the collar county riders who have been told their needs were secondary– are watching to see whether the reform delivers in practice what it promises in statute. That accountability is the work. The true test of a nation isn't what it paves. It's who it moves. Illinois just reminded us how to start.

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