In an age of fast wireless access to virtual destinations, our experience with physical mobility continues to deteriorate: From crumbling infrastructure to crippling congestion, the quality of user experience is falling across the spectrum of transportation systems and services. Residents' and policymakers' expectations continue to diminish—from deferred maintenance and underinvestment to inefficient operation and indifference to travelers.

The proposition that speed, convenience and reliability should be normal expectations for travelers—in this case for access to and from O'Hare International Airport—is a welcome and timely notion. O'Hare is one of the area's major assets. But after your plane lands, getting out of the airport and to your ultimate destination can be daunting and taxing.

Fast, dedicated rail links to city centers are de rigueur at gleaming Asian airports, an integral part of planned development of remote mega-airport locations for growing economies. Most major European capitals similarly feature direct express rail airport links—albeit with varying speeds. Rail's exclusive right of way and limited stops enable high-speed services and a high degree of reliability not afforded by other modes.

Travelers would greatly benefit from an express rail link from O'Hare to downtown Chicago—not only because it would save precious time, but because it would be reliable. Studies by travel behavior specialists reveal that while travelers value time savings at a rate roughly equivalent to their wage rate, they value reductions in the variability of travel time even more.

Beyond travelers, a whole chain of benefits accrue to businesses that need to be accessible to customers. O'Hare is an economic development engine for the city of Chicago and the entire region—a key strategic asset for a diverse economy where the physical and the virtual come together.

Transportation professionals are trained to conduct short-term cost-benefit assessments. When the problem is defined merely as going from point A to point B, costs and benefits become narrowly defined, and some variant of the status quo is implemented. When a strategic perspective is adopted, second and higher-order benefits are considered. Several studies have documented the connection between transportation infrastructure and economic activity, including employment, and attracting and retaining businesses.

Legitimate questions arise about the relative priority of airport-oriented travel vs. everyday mobility for residents. Fortunately, this is not a zero-sum game, and airport express rail links offer a range of alternative financing and business model possibilities that are not likely in connection with mass transit.
Clearly, one rail link from O'Hare to the Loop won't solve all our transportation problems. But it will be an important start—and it may inspire citizens and policy-makers to again make efficient travel without aggravation the norm, rather than the exception.

SOUND OFF: Send a column for the Opinion page to opinion@chicagobusiness.com. Please include a telephone number for verification purposes, and limit submissions to 425 words or fewer.

© 2011 by Crain Communications Inc.
What do you think?

DAN J. wrote:

This is a great idea. This should be part of a bullet train network -- especially the one that Governor Quinn and the University of Illinois are currently studying to connect to Champaign-Urbana (with branches to Indianapolis and to St. Louis). And the bullet train should extend from O'Hare up to Madison and on to Minneapolis-St. Paul so O'Hare congestion would lessen as regional flights would be replaced with regional train rides.

8/18/2011 4:14 PM CDT

Harvey K. wrote:

Not only do major airports around the world have non-stop express service to the downtown, there also are metro (subway) connections like the CTA Blue Line and regional (suburban) and intercity services fanning out as well. In some cases, intercity services to nearby cities within 200 miles may offer airline connections instead of costly short flights.
An opportunity still exists for fast and frequent service to O'Hare and beyond from Union Station and McCormick Place; but capacity improvements would be needed along the Metra NCS route and a reasonably direct and less expensive underground extension would be needed directly to the international and domestic terminals. This would be preferable to longer route around the Airport and a terminal on the west side with a shuttle connection to the terminals. The shuttle service at O'Hare Transfer was an expedient, but hardly world-class.

8/15/2011 7:58 PM CDT

You must be logged in to leave a comment. Login | Register

(Note: Your first name and last initial will appear with your remarks.)