New CTA cars prioritize capacity, not service, experts say

by CAROLYN SURH
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Two Chicago transportation experts expressed doubts about the seating configurations in the new Chicago Transit Authority rail cars unveiled Thursday during a press conference.

The center-facing seats are seen as less comfortable for passengers, and may make the CTA less competitive as a mode of transportation.

“When you’re looking at the viewpoint of competing for riders, then that’s not going to achieve it. Purely from a service standpoint, having the new cars with the technology is good, that’s all positive. The main negative is from the overall user experience,” said Professor Hani Mahmassani, director of the Northwestern University Transportation Center.

The new train car model retires the current seat configuration in favor of space-saving aisle-facing seats. The new design reduces the number of seats by about 17 percent.

“The density in our system isn’t so great that we should write off getting a seat. I’m not talking about the Red Line at rush hour, I’m talking about the other 90 percent of the system,” said Joseph Schwieterman, director of DePaul University’s Chaddick Institute for Metropolitan Development.

The prototypes, which will start test runs on the Red Line next week, have four fold-up and 34 aisle-facing seats, creating a wider center aisle and more space for bicycles, strollers and luggage at the expense of up to eight fewer seats per car. Overall, the new model increases maximum passenger capacity to 123 passengers.

“I think as other modes of transportation become more comfortable, it’s a shame that the CTA is taking a step backwards with fewer seats. It reinforces the notion that transit is inherently uncomfortable,” Schwieterman said.

In the Chicago area, the average commute by train is approximately 45 minutes, including walk time, while in a car it’s about 25 minutes, according to experts.

The seating configuration was at the request of the CTA, according to the manufacturer, Montreal-based Bombardier Transportation Mass Transit Corp.

“The end result is a wider aisle, more room to maneuver. It’s easier to get on and off,” said Maryanne Roberts, spokeswoman for
Bombardier.

The new fleet, comprising 406 rail cars and a $603.6 million investment, is sorely needed. The new models will replace cars that have been in service for up to 41 years and have outdated, inefficient propulsion and braking systems. The recommended lifespan for a rail car is 25 years.

The new design adds six inches to the narrowest point of center aisles, and will have passenger support poles and hard straps plus two spaces for wheelchairs. The prototypes include several new passenger safety features, a more efficient braking system, an improved communication system and modernized climate regulation.

New safety features include seven networked security cameras per car, an intercom enabling the rail operator to see and communicate with passengers, and an emergency communication system. Lighted station indicator maps and destination signs will also be on the interior and exterior of the new 5000 series model.