

## Lessons from our Olympic Competition: Six ideas to improve the CTA without spending very much money

I recently returned from spending a week in Tokyo which, along with Chicago is one of the “candidate cities” for the 2016 Olympics. News reports suggest that public transportation is one of the strong points in Tokyo’s bid and one of the weakest points in Chicago’s. Indeed any honest Chicago resident who visits Tokyo would have to concede that their system of public transit puts us to shame. Tokyo hosts a massive network of modern trains, subways and buses that run on-time and smoothly to virtually all corners of the region. Chicago can’t and probably shouldn’t try to imitate Tokyo’s system—we simply aren’t as dense and by temperament and history, rely much more on autos. Still, during my trip I was struck by the fact that there are a large number of simple and quite cheap things that Chicago could learn from Tokyo. None of these things would dramatically alter Chicago’s public transportation system but each might help a little bit and might get us thinking about others ways to cheaply maintain and improve this important public service. While wandering around Tokyo’s trains and subways I made a few notes of ideas that Chicago might be able to do use for very little cost, I offer them in a humble spirit of constructive cross-cultural communication:

1. A unified system of swipe cards. The “Chicago card” allows CTA riders to quickly and easily pay for CTA buses and trains but it doesn’t work on Metra or Pace. Tokyo’s “Suica” and “Passmo cards” work on hundreds of separate bus and train lines maintained by many different companies around Tokyo. You can even use the Tokyo cards at vending machines and for many other purchases around the city.
2. Excellent signage. Station designers in Tokyo have thought long and hard about how to convey lots of information to many riders clearly and concisely (in both Japanese and English). A few examples are:
  - a. Station signs display the previous station in grey and the next station in bold so you immediately know which direction the train is traveling.
  - b. Every station has signs displaying the number of minutes it takes to get to all subsequent stations on the line.
  - c. Train schedules are prominently displayed in beautiful easy-to-read laminated signs.
  - d. Markers on the floor of the stations tell you where the car doors will be located when the train pulls into the station so that you don’t have to run down the platform to get into a car. People queue at the doors during crowded periods.
  - e. Train “maps” posted at each station tell you what car to enter to most conveniently transfer to another line at a subsequent station. For example, if you enter at station one but will need the steps going down at station three, the map tells you to get on car five.
  - f. Each station is assigned a number as well as a name, this clears up a lot of potential confusion since many stops have similar names. This could be useful hear too, I once asked my daughter to meet me at the “Chicago”

stop. She went to Chicago stop on the Blue line, which is about one mile away from the Chicago red line stop where I was waiting.

- g. Handicapped seating is clearly delineated in the train cars and hanging straps are a darker color in the vicinity of this seating so that when you enter the train car you can clearly see which seats are reserved for the handicapped.
3. Noise control. When I first starting visiting Tokyo in the early 1980s the announcement systems were loud, obnoxious and so distorted that they were hard to understand much as they are in Chicago today. In Tokyo they have fixed these problems. A short musical interlude announces the arrival of each train, announcement are clear and easy to understand even though the volume is much lower than it used to be.
4. Traffic control. Tokyo trains accommodate far larger crowds than even the most populace CTA stations like the Fullerton Red line stop. But in Tokyo the crowds are well managed and it is usually easy to get to and from trains. Stairwells have clearly marked aisle for ascending or descending. Signs ask people to keep to the right so others can walk on the left side of escalators.
5. Bike friendly systems. Many Tokyo residents bike to the train station every day and there is abundant and well-organized bike parking near the stations. There are many stairwells that lead under (or over) Tokyo train tracks. Often, these stairwells have a middle section so that people can ride their bikes up or down the stairs.
6. Maximizing advertising revenue. The more money the train system can garner from advertising, the more money that will be available for maintenance and improvement of the system. Tokyo trains are filled with appealing and well maintained advertising for a wide-variety of products. CTA trains have a few ads above the seats but they are difficult to see without pivoting your head, they are often unattractive and they change infrequently. In Tokyo, the ads hang from well-designed placards over the middle of the aisles. They change often and are immaculately maintained. Most Tokyo trains also have two built-in video screens over each door. The video screens display both announcement about the train (next stop Shinjuku for example) and advertisements.

Mayor Daley has made no secret of his desire to emulate European cities' green spaces and wide use of public art. He often invites mayors from other cities to visit Chicago and has been a leading force for international communication about ways to improve big cities. Sending a delegation of transit professionals to work for a week or so with their counterparts in Tokyo might be an extremely profitable investment.