



# Cover Story

## Travel is no travail in pedestrian-friendly Wilmette

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### WILMETTE

Wilmette's recent favorable ranking as a transit-friendly suburb is good news to village officials who have spent the last few years intent on making the Metra mass transit system an integral part downtown Wilmette's future.



Village board members Chris Canning and Alan Swanson await a train on a Wilmette Metra platform. Wilmette is ranked number 2 in the top 20 transit and commuter-friendly Chicago suburbs by a DePaul University study on transit. | JOE CYGANOWSKI-FOR SUN-TIMES MEDIA

But the study, by researchers from DePaul University's Chaddock Institute for Metropolitan Development, isn't telling them much they don't already know.

"It's recognition for the things we're doing, and hopefully more developers will look at the village center," Village President Chris Canning said Aug. 14. "In that respect we're very pleased with the results. But we recognize there's more to be done."

One study author

suggested that helping communities improve their transit-oriented development is at least one reason to pay attention to its findings.

The 28-page document, released July 26, judged Chicago's middle and outer-ring suburbs' transit amenities, focusing on 25 finalists and naming 20 of them as top transit-friendly communities. Wilmette ranked second, behind only Lagrange.

Study researchers tried to draw clear

portraits of towns' mass transit services, team member Joseph Schwieterman said.

Schwieterman, Director of the Institute and corresponding author for the study, wrote that Chicago suburbs compete for residents with the quality of public transportation access as much as they do with libraries, parks and schools.

The study isn't a scientific tool, but a way to raise public awareness and guide planners and

developers "seeking to improve the transit friendly qualities of their communities," he wrote.

"We found that every city lost points in easily-fixed areas, like the cleanliness of stations or the lighting of parking lots," Schwieterman said Aug. 13. "I was surprised at the lack of lighting in many communities' parking lots, for example."

He said it can take a decade or more for communities to join what he called the

transit elite, because the process is subject to uncontrollable variables like economic swings.

Some suburbs had disappointing results even after they built excellent train stations, because the economy didn't cooperate, he said; the real estate market's collapse meant developers simply weren't coming into downtowns to build the mixed-use projects that nurture, and are nurtured by, mass transit.

Schwieterman said the study also tried to

### TRAVEL NEWS

WHAT: Study ranks transit-friendly suburbs  
HOW WILMETTE DID: Near the top

quantify what he called the "walkability" of suburbs' downtowns.

"There is a class of transit-focused young people who incorporate a lot of activities in their day; they walk to the station in the morning, drop off their dry cleaning, get their coffee, and on the way back home, they'll stop at the library, or go to Panera Bread while they check their email on their smart phone," he said. "We needed to measure how suburbs serve them."

Once it decided how to measure walkability, the team named seven suburbs, including LaGrange, Northbrook and Park Ridge, "walkers' paradises." Wilmette and 16 other finalists were "very walkable."

The village's good, but not stellar, score in this category probably owed more to its downtown's

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size than anything else, Schwieterman said. Its small area simply doesn't provide the diverse amenities found in LaGrange, the category winner.

On the other hand, "Wilmette was off the charts in terms of people walking and biking to the train," he said. "It was amazing to see a community that used commuter rail to intensively, despite not having a big downtown."

Schwieterman said his team gave a lot of weight to whether finalist communities had significant PACE bus routes and connections with their Metra stops because "PACE can be a lifesaver." Wilmette fit that bill, since its commuters seemed to make heavier use of available bus routes, he said.

Village officials were pleased, but not surprised at the results. Developers weighing where to start projects probably aren't swayed by academic reports, "but any time you get press like this, it doesn't hurt," Wilmette community development director John Adler said Aug. 8.

Wilmette's downtown master plan centers to a huge extent on transit, Canning pointed out; the downtown master plan that trustees made part of Wilmette's comprehensive plan in 2011 grew from a study largely funded by the Regional Transit Authority. The plan,

written after three years of study, emphasized encouraging a blend of retail, living space and parking availability downtown. At its heart, it's a collection of development guidelines, traffic circulation suggestions and zoning changes aimed at creating a business and pedestrian-friendly downtown. Those are now being written in to Wilmette's existing zoning code.

Wilmette village Trustee Alan Swanson, who chairs the board's land use committee, said developing transit friendly communities and providing good transit opportunities doesn't happen simultaneously. The latter generally has to happen first, he said Aug. 14, and transit has to be attractive or it won't be used.

"The fact that you have transportation outlets leads to (development) intensity," Swanson said, adding that Wilmette's transit options do make it attractive to residents who want to be able to work in the city while having relatively quick access to home.

He noted that a Chicago Area Transportation Study in which he once participated found that time spent commuting is the one variable that people can't change: "You can move the jobs around, change jobs, but you can't make the day longer. So cutting transit time is valuable."

Although the Chaddick study excluded

Chicago suburbs with urban mass transit lines (Oak Park and Evanston weren't included because they have extensive CTA bus and train routes), Swanson and Canning said Wilmette's single CTA station is important to the village's transportation picture.

Generations of Wilmette residents have used the "el" station at 4th and Linden in south Wilmette to get to work, and go to Cubs games, Canning said. Generations of city dwellers discovered Wilmette as students traveling to Loyola Academy or Regina Dominican, "and many eventually made the choice to

Patrick McFadden, former president of the Wilmette-Kenilworth Chamber of Commerce, said this week the study probably won't directly affect Wilmette's business climate but it does reflect the reality that mass transit will increase in importance in future.

"Good transportation to the city is going to be increasingly important as gas prices continue to increase and as we become more green in our outlook. Municipalities who act on that will have successful growth."

To download the Chaddick Institute's "Twenty Top Transit Suburbs" study, go to <http://las.depaul.edu/chaddick/Research-andPublications/index.asp>.