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Why Is Chicago's Rail Extension Funding Considered Controversial?

The Chicago Transit Authority is hoping to finally make good on a promise to expand a subway line to the southern edge of the city. First it needs the City Council to agree to a plan for raising billions of dollars to support the project.

By the end of the decade, Chicago's Red Line train could finally extend past its current terminus at 95th Street and into the far South Side, connecting some of the city's poorest communities to its sprawling transit network and fulfilling a mayoral promise made more than half a century ago.

The project, known as the Red Line Extension (RLE), has been in active planning by the Chicago Transit Authority since at least 2006. It would add four new stations and 5.6 miles of elevated and ground-level track to one of the busiest routes on Chicago's "L" system. It's an expansion of urban railway infrastructure on a rare scale in an age of funding crises and shrinking ridership for public transit agencies. But local leaders say it's a long-overdue investment that could cut travel time from the far South Side to the Loop by as much as 30 minutes while providing a host of economic benefits to underserved communities during and after construction.

The CTA completed the environmental review process for the project earlier this month, and is hoping to move into the engineering phase by next year. It's seeking more than $2 billion in federal funds, with the city and CTA required to put up about $1.6 billion of their own. To raise the local funds, the authority is proposing a new twist on an old tool called tax increment financing (TIF), which has been used extensively to fund economic development in Chicago. And despite some concerns about the proposal raised by several of the city's aldermen this summer, the project's planners say they're confident the Red Line Extension will move forward.

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