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## Chicago transportation officials brace for NATO summit

By [Jon Hilkevitch](#), Chicago Tribune reporter

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O'Hare International Airport stands ready to shut down a runway and use it as a VIP ("Very Important Planes") parking lot.

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The CTA started running tabletop planning exercises Friday to keep transit officials nimble regarding any last-minute adjustments to bus and train service, routes and schedules that could come up.

In Chicago and the suburbs, gates at highway entrance ramps are being checked to make sure they are in working order to close and reopen access to the roads — a procedure originally designed for use in an all-out emergency like a bioterrorism attack.

The carefully choreographed and controlled chaos in motion that unfurls each day on the highways, runways, railroads and arterial streets of the nation's transportation hub will click up a notch when world leaders and demonstrators descend on Chicago for the NATO summit May 20-21. Protesters representing a wide spectrum of viewpoints will be traveling downtown on the CTA and Metra, bumping shoulders with regular commuters clutching backpacks and coffee cups on packed trains and buses.

"The city will be open for business during the NATO summit, and we want everyone to enjoy Chicago," said Delores Robinson, spokeswoman for the Chicago Office of Emergency Management and Communications. "There will be some restrictions and rolling street closures just to get (NATO participants) to and from where they need to go. But the city is wholly equipped to manage an event of this magnitude, and people who want to move around the city will still be able to do so."

About 10,000 people, including about 2,000 journalists, are expected to come to Chicago for the summit, Robinson said. That estimate does not include anti-NATO protesters.

The flow of airline arrivals and departures at O'Hare will speed up and slow to a trickle like water from a faucet based on the comings and goings of about 50 heads of state and their entourages.

Some delegations may decide to avoid O'Hare and land instead at satellite airports in the suburbs, including Chicago Executive Airport in Wheeling and Waukegan Regional Airport, said Laura Brown, a spokeswoman for the Federal Aviation Administration in Washington.

"Sometimes, they don't want to come into the major airport for security reasons," Brown said.

An O'Hare official who attended a Secret Service briefing in February, the only one held so far regarding NATO-related operations at the airport, said the 10,000-foot runway 14 Left/ 32 Right will be used as a main parking area for the delegations' aircraft. The official, who is not authorized to speak publicly, also said the city will provide "follow-me" escort vehicles to lead the visiting planes as they taxi around the airfield, as a safety measure to avoid wrong turns by foreign and military pilots who haven't flown to O'Hare before.

"We don't want any runway incursions" involving planes on a potential collision course, the official said. "It's going to be complicated enough having fuel trucks driving out onto taxiways and runways to fuel planes parked all over the airfield."

Under commercial airline operations, fueling is done at the ramp outside the terminal gate.

The FAA and the Chicago Department of Aviation are not expecting the NATO summit to affect travel on the airlines serving O'Hare. But that could change.

"In one respect, I don't see this as a big deal," said a veteran air traffic controller at O'Hare who asked not to be identified. "But if there is bad weather or all the delegations try to arrive at the same time, it could be an air traffic nightmare. If there are problems, they will cause delays for the scheduled air carriers and their passengers, not the NATO guys."

City aviation spokeswoman Tammy Chase said O'Hare will be busier than usual because of the mix of commercial and special NATO-related flights. Chase said the city doesn't know whether Midway Airport, which has shorter runways than O'Hare and cannot accommodate larger planes, would be used by the NATO delegations.

The Kennedy Expressway and other highways will likely be closed to traffic temporarily to provide the dignitaries with extra security and a whirlwind motorcade trip from O'Hare to downtown, leaving the rest of the driving populace waiting for the all-clear, according to city traffic officials who are waiting for the final plan to be issued by the Secret Service.

A possible parking ban on downtown streets would clear the streets of cars and the potential for car bombs or for protesters to set vehicles on fire, traffic management and law enforcement officials said.

How it plays out is anyone's guess at this point because the Secret Service is withholding details until shortly before the summit in order to keep its security strategy under wraps.

The Secret Service will permit passenger rail lines that pass through McCormick Place to operate during the summit, meaning Metra Electric District, South Shore and Amtrak trains will run normal schedules during the meeting of world leaders at McCormick Place. The tracks run under the lakefront convention center.

The Secret Service has not announced whether sections of Lake Shore Drive and Cermak Road near McCormick Place as well as some downtown streets will be closed during part or all of the summit. The world leaders will be staying at hotels spread throughout the downtown, complicating the traffic strategy.

Getting to McCormick Place should be relatively easy for the NATO delegations. In 2002, the Metropolitan Pier and Exposition Authority opened the McCormick Place busway, a 2 1/2-mile roadway alongside the Metra /Illinois Central Railroad tracks through Grant Park. During conventions, it is used by shuttle buses transporting attendees between McCormick Place and downtown hotels.

The best advice offered by transportation officials to everyday commuters is to plan for normal conditions, anticipate the unexpected and, above all, be patient.

"The Secret Service doesn't give you a lot of notice. So we are planning every day, coordinating with the city,

having sort of planning exercises, doing everything we can to prepare without having all the information that's ultimately necessary," CTA President Forrest Claypool said.

CTA service planning officials have conducted exercises that simulate various hypothetical scenarios of street closings and bus reroutes, CTA spokesman Brian Steele said. "We've done these kind of exercises many times in the past for other events, as well as for our winter-preparation activities," Steele said.

The CTA and Metra will run extra buses and trains to serve larger than usual numbers of riders during the NATO summit weekend, which also includes the Crosstown Classic baseball games between the Cubs and White Sox at Wrigley Field.

With all the hype and apprehension over the NATO summit, many Chicago-area residents who normally might go downtown to shop, visit museums or stroll through Millennium and Grant parks might opt to stay away.

That type of behavior typically occurs on the first several days of a major expressway construction project. Many drivers seeking to avoid congestion caused by lane closings take alternative routes, then migrate back to their normal pattern after discovering that the predicted gridlock did not live up to the buildup.

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