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# Train to plane: How U.S. cities rate

By Ed Perkins  
Tribune Media Services

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Chicago's announcement of big plans for improved rail service to Midway and O'Hare airports highlights the growing importance of train-to-plane services in the U.S. Although we still lag behind Europe in providing good rail airport access, we're improving. Here's a look at current U.S. train-to-plane services.

First, let's propose a scoring system, based on the five most important criteria:

- Location of airport rail station. 3 points for a rail terminal in or immediately adjacent to the airport terminal; 2 points for a people-mover connection to a remote rail station; and 1 point for a shuttle bus connection.
- Railcars. 3 points for railcars dedicated to airport service, with baggage racks; 2 points for cars roomy enough to avoid rush-hour conflicts with commuters; and 1 point for dumping air travelers in with the commuters.
- Frequency. 3 points for every 15 minutes or better; 2 points for 15- to 30-minute intervals; and 1 point for fewer than two trips per hour.
- Speed. 3 points for non-stop trips; 2 points for limited-stop trains; and 1 point for multistop trips.
- Convenience of downtown terminal. 3 points for at least one downtown terminal providing easy access to/from cabs; 2 points for central terminal without easy cab access; and 1 point for all others.

The cornerstone of Chicago's new service, with a hoped-for opening in 2010, is a new downtown terminal for just the airport services, coupled with non-stop trains between downtown and the airports. It would use dedicated railcars with plenty of baggage racks. Initially, the trains would use the same tracks as regular transit trains, meaning that the service, even though non-stop, wouldn't be any faster than the regular trains. Future phases would reduce travel times through passing tracks or even dedicated airport-only tracks. The initial phase would score 13 out of a possible 15 points;

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with future fast-track developments, the score would be a perfect 15. No U.S. city currently scores that high; only a few European cities make the top grade.

In the U.S., New York/JFK currently rates a top score of 13 points, losing only because of the people-mover connection to the train and lack of dedicated airport cars on the trains between Jamaica and Manhattan.

Other scores: Cleveland, Newark and San Francisco, 12 points; Atlanta, Philadelphia and Washington, 11 points; Baltimore, Boston, Chicago (at present), Minneapolis, Oakland, Portland and St. Louis, 10 points; Dallas-Ft Worth, Los Angeles and Miami, 6-7 points.

The biggest problem with most U.S. train-to-plane transit services is that they share downtown terminals with regular transit services. Typically, that means you get on/off at a busy station or street stop that has no cabstand or even a convenient loading/unloading zone. Also, in many systems, you have to schlep your baggage up and down stairs, with no escalator or elevator services.

Beyond downtown terminals, the different systems have different strong points and weaknesses. Atlanta, Baltimore, Chicago (both airports), Cleveland, Minneapolis, Portland, San Francisco and Washington all enjoy airport stations that are either in-terminal or immediately adjacent to the air terminal. Most cities enjoy 15-minute frequencies or better, but trains are less frequent at Newark, Philadelphia and especially at Dallas-Ft Worth. No U.S. systems currently provide dedicated airport cars with baggage racks and other amenities strictly for air travelers. Boston's convenient system suffers because of the shuttle bus access to the airport rail station and the need to change trains, downtown, to get to the more popular visitor centers.

Despite the drawbacks, I recommend using rail access in all of the U.S. cities except Dallas-Ft. Worth, L.A. and Miami. There's something great about sailing over, under or beside the traffic that snarls airport access so much of the time.

And if you're interested in rail access at any foreign airport, a very useful Web site, [www.airportrailwaysoftheworld.com/arc\(underscore\)en.shtml](http://www.airportrailwaysoftheworld.com/arc(underscore)en.shtml), provides links to just about all of your options.

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eperkins@mind.net

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