

Witness Testimony of  
Honorable Chris Koos  
Mayor, Town of Normal, IL

Before the  
Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, United States House of Representatives  
The Honorable John L. Mica, Chairman  
The Honorable Tammy Duckworth, Ranking Member  
Subcommittee on Transportation and Public Assets

Hearing: "Lagging Behind: The State of High Speed Rail in the U.S."

Thursday, July 14, 2016

### Introduction

Chairman Mica, Ranking Member Duckworth, and distinguished Members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I am Chris Koos, and have proudly served as the Mayor of the Town of Normal, Illinois since 2003. Normal is a medium-sized city in central Illinois, about 140 miles southwest of Chicago, and 160 miles northeast of St. Louis. We are the seventh most populous community in Illinois outside of the Chicago metropolitan area and home to state's oldest public college, Illinois State University (ISU).

First, I would like to thank the members of this subcommittee and the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee for including a passenger rail title for the first time with the surface transportation authorization in the Fixing America's Surface Transportation (FAST) Act programs. The FAST Act provides my city, state, and region the tools needed to address safety, capital, and rail operations to support a truly multimodal and efficient transportation system. I look forward to working with our federal government partners on implementing the programs outlined in the FAST Act. I believe transit is a necessary investment and a core function of federal, state, and local governments. Managed properly, mass transit investment is a very wise use of public money as it promotes economic growth, increases mobility, and improves quality of life.

### About Normal

The Town of Normal is adjacent to the City of Bloomington in McLean County and since its founding in 1865 has been a railroad town. Our community is anchored in education as home to Illinois State University, Heartland Community College, Illinois Wesleyan University, Heartland Community College, Lincoln College and renowned Children's Discovery Museum.

We pride ourselves on being a business friendly community and are home to the corporate headquarters of State Farm Insurance, Country Financial, Advocate Bromenn Medical Center, Growmark Inc, Nestle, and Beernuts to name a few.

Normal is served by Interstate 39, I-55, I-74, one passenger railroad line, the Central Illinois Regional Airport, and Connect Transit public bus service, and the Constitution Trail which is one of the most extensive urban multiuse trails in the state.

### Improving Transit and Valuing Transit Oriented Development (TOD)

As recently as 10 years ago, Normal's development was primarily occurring on its perimeter. The central business district, now known as Uptown Normal was struggling. While most buildings were occupied, rents were low, turnover was high, and the area was beginning to lose key businesses. The Town's political leaders and the business community began to rally around a vision to improve access to transit and revitalize Uptown and awaken it into a key asset that could help our region compete and prosper economically. Early planning efforts identified road, rail, and transit improvements as key to Uptown redevelopment.

Our passenger rail station is the second busiest in the state of Illinois and the busiest on the 284-mile Chicago to St. Louis corridor outside of these cities. The previous station was built in 1990 on the Normal Town Hall parking lot, replacing a station in Bloomington that was in disrepair. By the mid-2000s, increasing ridership on the Lincoln and Texas Eagle Service resulted in overcrowding at the so-called "Amshack."

Key to our Uptown Normal master plan was a transportation center designed to provide a multimodal hub to accommodate an expanding city bus system, intercity and charter buses, a station and new platform for Amtrak service to Chicago and St. Louis, airport shuttles, taxis, park and ride facilities, and pedestrian and bike connections to downtown and the universities. We wanted a well-designed and well-constructed station that would provide better access to jobs and school, improve safety and security at the rail stop and spur transit oriented development.

### Partnerships

Key to the success of Uptown redevelopment has been the Town's philosophy of partnership and engagement with elected officials, community stakeholders and federal agencies. As a result, the Town enjoys great support from all levels of government at the local, state and federal level. I attribute our redevelopment success to a number of factors including:

1. Unified stakeholder relationships,
2. A strong commitment by the Town council to delivering a high-quality, cost-effective project under fiscal constraint,
3. Partnerships with private developers to find innovative solutions for higher-density, mixed-use communities designed to increase transit ridership and promote pedestrian and bicycle mobility,
4. Solid local agreements with UPRR and IDOT, and
5. Robust communications with FTA and FHWA.

The plan for the Uptown Station received tremendous and steadfast support from major players in the community, including from the state of Illinois, our sister city Bloomington, McLean County, our regional airport, Illinois State University, and Federal and State legislators. The business community was extremely supportive as well; the McLean County Chamber of Commerce, State Farm Insurance, the Bank of Illinois, and the Bloomington-Normal Economic Development Council were strong advocates for the station. As part of the process, the Town worked closely with Amtrak and the Union Pacific Railroad.

### The Uptown Station

In 2010, Normal was awarded one of the first TIGER grants in the nation. The \$46 million project received \$22 million from TIGER, \$11 million in additional federal funding, and more than \$13 million in state and local contributions. Six months after receiving funds, it was the first TIGER project in the nation to break ground and begin construction.

Less than two years later, in 2012, the multimodal transportation center – called Uptown Station - was completed on time and within budget. The 63,385 square foot facility was constructed on the north side of the railroad tracks, across from the former stop, includes a new Amtrak station and space for public transit and regional buses. The upper three stories of the station serve as municipal offices for the Town of Normal. A 381-space parking deck is attached to the west side with bus bays located on the ground floor. The center is adjacent to the Constitution Trail, a popular rails-to-trails conversion that runs through the center of Normal and its sister city, Bloomington, and offers covered bicycle parking near the bus bays, additional bicycle parking outside the building on the sidewalks, and public restrooms.

Since opening in July 2012, Uptown Station and its adjacent plaza have become the new heart of Normal. City Hall was relocated to the upper floors of the station building, the adjacent children's museum began drawing even more families and school visits from miles around, and two major hotels along with several other businesses opened nearby. Adjacent to the station, the Town of Normal and the Illinois Department of Transportation constructed a roundabout that won the US Environmental Protection Agency's 2011 National Award for Smart Growth Achievement in the category of Civic Places. It also won the Transportation Planning Excellence Award from the FTA and FHWA. The circle is an attractive public space with ample seating encouraging people to talk, play, and hang-out in the middle of this revitalizing neighborhood.

### Private Investment

Uptown Normal is now a vibrant neighborhood with residential, commercial, and entertainment opportunities. Thus far, public investment of approximately \$85 million in Federal, state and local monies in the transportation has generated more than \$150 million in private investment in the Uptown Normal district.

The station itself includes a Subway sandwich shop and a shoe shine stand and has supported the construction of a 228- room Marriott Hotel with 40,000 square foot conference center. A

114-room Hyatt Place hotel opened one year ago across the street from Uptown Station. The museum and hotel/conference center have already drawn many visitors to Uptown Normal, and the station serves as a transportation hub for visitors arriving by train, bus, etc. Currently there are plans to invest an additional \$45 million in the area, further promoting livability and quality of life.

### Mobility

The Uptown Station is conveniently located just two blocks from ISU, one of the largest universities in the state with over 25,000 students, and less than two miles from Illinois Wesleyan University. The station provides a critical, reliable, and economical link for students to Chicago and other cities throughout the country. The station also helps colleges and universities in our region improve their competitiveness in the international academic community by attracting students, faculty, and often their families who expect to be able to get to major cities quickly and reliably without the use of an automobile.

Normal's location between the two mega-regions of Chicago and St. Louis benefits immensely from having a passenger rail station served by the Lincoln Service – a four daily round trip state-supported service – and Amtrak's Texas Eagle long-distance service. Traveling to Bloomington-Normal via Amtrak is a two and a half hour ride from both St. Louis and Chicago. Greater mobility and access to education and jobs provided by the Amtrak service is vital to our residents, businesses and economic stability.

The new station has had a positive impact not only on Amtrak service, but also Connect Transit, the local public transportation provider. The opening of Uptown Station has assisted in the reinvention of the local transit system, which has increased local bus ridership 34% since 2012, the year of the station's opening. Uptown Station is now the busiest stop in the county, with around 470,000 passengers per year.

Connect Transit, which was named 2015 Small System of the Year by the American Public Transportation Association, has recently completed a transit network redesign study to further improve and modernize service. Uptown Station will anchor this redesign, serving as an endpoint for the Green line, the first high frequency transit route in the region, providing 15 minute service between the Normal and Bloomington central business districts. In addition, six other redesigned and streamlined routes will utilize Uptown Station, which will provide faster, more direct access to the community's universities, major employers, retail, and a direct connection to the Central Illinois Regional Airport.

### Higher Speed Rail

In an effort to improve reliability and frequency of long distance rail service, the Town in partnership with UPRR, the state, dozens of municipalities, Amtrak and the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) have identified system upgrades that will benefit both freight and passenger rail service in the Midwest. Subsequently, Illinois received \$1.2 billion to improve

service between Chicago and St. Louis from FRA's High-Speed Intercity Passenger Rail (HSIPR) program, with \$690 million state and local match. The state is currently upgrading tracks and bridges, installing Positive Train Control, and making grade crossing and right-of-way improvements this year. When completed in 2017, the project will produce safer conditions, decrease travel times, improve on-time performance and produce increased ridership and economic benefit for our town and our residents. In Normal, the Illinois High-Speed Rail project is funding a second platform and upgrades to the waiting room. Construction is ongoing and is anticipated to be completed in early 2017.

The Town of Normal along with our local stakeholders rely on a strong partnership with Congress, FRA and Amtrak, and is committed to a shared vision and a local, regional, and federal planning process to continue to make improvements to our regional and long distance rail system to connect the region with reliable, fast, and frequent passenger rail service. When completed, about 90 percent of the Midwest's population will be within a one-hour car ride to a Midwest Regional Rail System station or within 30 minutes of a feeder bus station.

I recognize, along with many other leaders in Illinois and the Midwest, the cost that traffic congestion imposes people and business. Small, medium, and even large businesses are not able to solve the problems associated with congestion on their own. This requires a strong and consistent government investment, that the federal government is especially situated to undertake. Robust and reliable capital investments are key to making all modes of transportation benefit our citizens and our economy – including passenger rail.

Federal support for transportation is a longstanding tradition and a core Constitutional responsibility since our nation's founding. We are proud to work with our Federal partners in creating, maintaining, and funding safe and efficient transportation systems and look forward to future collaboration.

Thank you for your consideration and the opportunity to contribute to this important national discussion.















# Chris Koos Biography

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Chris Koos was elected to his first term on the Normal Town Council in April of 2001. He was sworn in as Mayor of the Town of Normal on February 17, 2003 and his current term runs until 2017. In his 12<sup>th</sup> year, Mayor Koos has the longest running term of any mayor in Normal's history.

- Mr. Koos is a Bloomington-Normal native and attended Central Catholic High School and Illinois State University.
- He has been the owner and operator of Vitesse Cycle and Often Running, retail specialty stores, in Uptown Normal since 1979.
- Mr. Koos has long been active in the community. His civic activities include serving as Chairman of the Town of Normal Historic Preservation Commission for eight years.
- He is a member of the Uptown Normal Business Association and served four years as President.
- During the restoration of the Normal Theater, Mr. Koos served as Chair of the Restoration Advisory Committee and went on to serve on the Normal Theater Advisory Board.
- Mr. Koos has been very involved with the Bloomington-Normal Japanese Sister Cities Committee, Town of Normal 2025 Committee: Physical Environment Sub-Committee and McLean County Comprehensive Plan 2000 Committee, where he chaired the Urban Revitalization/Historic Preservation Sub-Committee.
- Mr. Koos has served as Vice Chair of the Selective Service Board of Appeals since 1983.
- During his tenure on the Town Council, Mr. Koos represented the Town on the Bloomington-Normal Area Convention and Visitors Bureau Committee, Economic Development Council and Illinois Municipal League.

As the Chief Elected Official for the Town of Normal, Mayor Koos has adopted the following policy priorities for the community:

- To encourage innovative new development with an emphasis on energy efficiency and environmental sensitivity.
- To revitalize the Central Business District of Normal.
- To pursue the preservation and restoration of the community's historic architectural resources.
- To pursue partnerships with private businesses in order to accomplish the community's development goals.
- To enhance the recreational opportunities in our community through the construction of new recreation facilities, the preservation of open space and the expansion of the existing walking/biking trail system.
- To work with other governmental partners in the area, including the City of Bloomington, Unit Five School District, McLean County, Illinois State University, and the State of Illinois to enhance the overall quality of life that is provided to all residents of the community.