Chicagoland's road to 2040

Transportation plan backs pay-as-you-go express lanes and finally confronting Lake County's woes

By Richard Wronski
TRIBUNE REPORTER

For 20 years, Diane Howe, of Spring Grove, has had to zigzag across Lake County roads to get to work in Buffalo Grove.

As she drives more than an hour each way, Howe wonders if her dream roadwork project — the long-proposed extension of Illinois Highway 53 — will ever be built.

"I don't think it's ever going to happen," said Howe, 65. "It's been in the planning for how many years?"

If it's any consolation, the thinkers at northeastern Illinois' top planning agency feel Howe's pain and that of thousands of others who complain of traversing Lake County's labyrinth.

The Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, or CMAP, has unveiled a transportation wish list that has the Illinois 53 extension and its companion project, the Illinois 120 corridor, at the top.

The roster of projects highlights the little-known agency's big-picture comprehensive plan, Go to 2040, which outlines a vision for the next 30 years and sets priorities for the seven-county region, including Kendall County.

The 400-page document also recommends fundamental changes in the way Chicagoans pay for their highways and mass transit system, including higher gasoline taxes and new user fees to combat congestion.

The increases are needed because the days of funding windfalls from Washington and Springfield are over, said Randy Blankenhorn, CMAP's executive director.

"We know the (funding) resources just aren't there to do everything there is to do," Blankenhorn said. "We have to invest what we have more wisely and focus on improving the economy and the environment."

Whereas legendary Chicago planner Daniel Burnham is credited with the famous quote, "Make no little plans. They have no magic ...," the message from Go to 2040 seems to be: "Make no big plans. We have no money."

Instead of backing multibillion-dollar projects such as the proposed suburb-to-suburb Metra STAR Line and the outer-ring Prairie Parkway in Kane and Kendall counties, CMAP sets more modest goals, such as completing the Elgin-O'Hare Expressway and building a western bypass around O'Hare International Airport.

The plan also says the CTA's Red Line should be extended south from 95th Street to 130th Street and a transportation center should be put in the West Loop to improve transfers among rapid transit, buses and all types of rail services.

Other recommendations include adding lanes to expressways and improving several Metra and transit lines.

All of the projects have been proposed for years, but Go to 2040 seeks to put them in line.

Strategies such as "congestion pricing" would impose additional fees on vehicles using "managed lanes" on expressways.

Congestion pricing uses variable tolls and zone-based charges to reduce traffic gridlock. For example, expressways would get express toll lanes whose rates would vary with demand and time of day.

"Transportation investments are not free," Blankenhorn said. "We have to find ways to pay for ... cially where we add lanes. People can still choose to ride in free lanes."

Illinois' unofficial but long-standing practice of sending 55 percent of state road funds downstate and keeping 45 percent in northeastern Illinois should be scrapped, the plan urges.

"Funds for transportation need to be allocated more wisely, using performance-driven criteria rather than arbitrary formulas," the plan notes. "Expensive new capacity projects should be built only if they yield benefits that outweigh their costs."

CMAP says Go to 2040's recommended projects have been evaluated based on how much they promote economic growth and reduce congestion and how likely they are to be funded.

It's not quite a winners-and-losers list because none of the projects has guaranteed funding. But some have a better chance ...

to stall some plans. Environment groups such as the Sierra Club and some residents favor local road improvements and more mass transit instead of more concrete in Lake County.

The backbone of the Chicago region is freight railroading, and Go to 2040 calls on the federal government to develop a strategy to address freight issues.

The plan also calls for the full funding and implementation of the Chicago Region Environmental and Transportation Efficiency program. CREATE is a public-private effort to reduce bottlenecks and raise train speeds.

Go to 2040 isn't just about transportation. Much of the document focuses on other issues, including land, water use and conservation ; education and workforce development; and government and tax policy. The plan is available at **cmap.illinois.gov**.

It needs final approval in Octo- ...

from the seven-county area. Then comes the task of implementing the plan's recommendations, which Blankenhorn acknowledged will be challenging.

Potential difficulties include convincing the public of the need to pay higher user fees for a better highway system and improved mass transit. Political opposition to raising taxes is expected.

"These are tough decisions, and there will be political issues with any of our policy recommendations," Blankenhorn said. "We have to educate public officials about why it's in their best interest to do these things. Part of CMAP's role is to lead these discussions."

DePaul University transportation expert Joseph Schwieterman, who wrote the book "Beyond Burnham: An Illustrated History of Planning for the Chicago Region," says CMAP must now ruffle feathers to assure its ... ever, so CMAP will need to apply heavy dose of salesmanship Schwieterman said. "CMAP standing on the shoulders of g ants, including Daniel Burnhar so the plan carries a surprisir amount of moral weight."

Freelance reporter Robert Channick contributed to this report.

Ending Illinois Highway 53 at Lake Cook Road was a huge transportation blunder, dozens of experts say. SIMON BRUBAKER/TRIBUNE PHOTO

CMAP concentrates on modest transportation proposals

The list of suggested transportation projects from the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning focuses on projects that can be completed without overwhelming amounts of state or federal funding.

New Projects and extensions

- A Central Lake County Corridor: IL 53 North and IL 120
- B Elgin O'Hare Expressway improvements
- C CTA Red Line Extension (south)
- D West Loop Transportation Center

Expressway additions and improvements

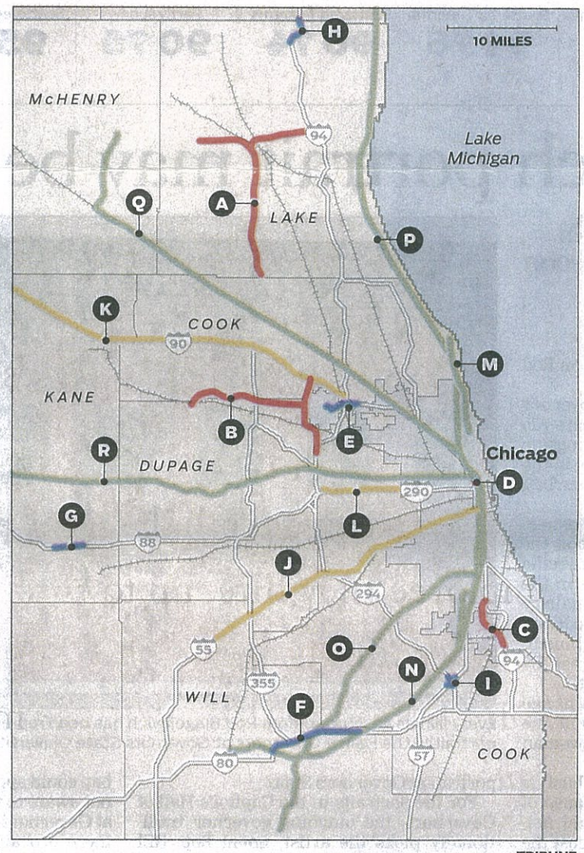
- E I-190 access improvements
- F I-80 add lanes (US 30 to US 45)
- G I-88 add lanes
- H I-94 add lanes north
- I I-294 and I-57 interchange

Managed lanes and multimodal corridors

- J I-55 managed lanes
- K I-90 managed lanes
- L I-290 Multimodal corridor

Transit improvements

- M CTA Red/Purple lines
- N Metra Rock Island
- O Metra SouthWest Service
- P Metra Union Pacific North
- Q Metra Union Pacific Northwest
- R Metra Union Pacific West



SOURCE: Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning

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What are CMAP and Go to 2040?

The General Assembly created the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning in 2005 to oversee land use and transportation planning for the region. CMAP is a consolidation of two agencies, the Northeastern Illinois Planning Commission and the Chicago Area Transportation Study.

CMAP's board of directors is made up of local officials from Cook, DuPage, Kane, Kendall, Lake, McHenry, and Will counties. Its chairman is Palos Hills Mayor Gerald Bennett.

CMAP's real power comes from its designation as the region's metropolitan planning organization, which makes it responsible for reviewing and approving projects that use federal transportation dollars.

Three years in the making, Go to 2040 is CMAP's comprehensive plan for the region. It is intended to address the projected arrival of more than 2 million new residents by 2040.

Go to 2040 isn't just about transportation. Much of the 400-page comprehensive plan focuses on other issues. It includes chapters on land and water use and conservation ("Livable Communities"), education and work force development ("Human Capital"), and government and tax policy ("Efficient Governance"). The plan is available at cmap.illinois.gov.

CMAP's staff will include the public's feedback and present the revised plan to the CMAP board for approval in October. Afterward, CMAP will focus on implementing Go to 2040's recommendations.

— Richard Wronski