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Q&A with Randy Blankenhorn – “As bold as Daniel Burnham”

By Patrick T. Reardon on Wed., 07/01/2009 –4:59 am.

First of three parts

Randy Blankenhorn is a policy wonk, but he and his agency have the clout --- on paper, at least --- to change the face of the Chicago metropolitan region over the next three decades.

Blankenhorn is the executive director of the newly minted Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP) which is responsible for land use and transportation planning in the seven-county region.

As we prepare to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the publication of the Plan of Chicago on Saturday, CMAP is the present-day heir of that seminal urban document --- and the greatest hope of future of planning for the Chicago region.

For the first time in this region, CMAP is a planning organization with teeth. Under state and federal law, it has the power to determine which transportation projects will receive U.S. funding --- and which won't. Without federal dollars, few highway projects are ever built.

The agency will make those decisions within the context of the GO TO 2040 comprehensive regional plan. That's being developed right now with the help this summer of thousands of everyday citizens like you and me, as well as the host of local officials. Once it's approved in late 2010, CMAP will be on its way.

THE BURNHAM BLOG

Urban planning touches every part of your day to day life. Join the conversation that is shaping the region for the next 100 years.

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ABOUT THIS BLOG

This blog is about history, planning and the future. It's rooted in the recognition that we live in a world that is created by plans – and by the failure to make plans. [\[MORE\]](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

[Patrick T. Reardon](#) is a Chicagoan, born and bred. He has been writing about the city, its region and planning issues, mainly in the Chicago Tribune, for nearly 40 years. [\[MORE\]](#)

Unless politics intervenes.



Blankenhorn, who grew up in McHenry and now lives in downtown Chicago, talked about the politics of planning, his hopes for the regional plan and a wide range of other topics during an interview in his office in the Sears Tower.

Here's an edited transcript of the first part of that interview:

Question: How is CMAP's planning approach similar to or different from Daniel Burnham's for the Plan of Chicago?

Answer: The way we're trying most to follow in the Burnham tradition is we're going to talk about implementation. Burnham had the grand vision --- and it was a great vision --- but he talked a lot about how to implement that vision and how to get the right people involved after the plan was done to make sure it happened.

(The CMAP process is) a little different from most regional plans, not only here but across the country because they are mostly about the vision. I like to say that, here in the Chicago area, we already get it --- we've got the vision. Now we've got to try to figure out how to get it done. That's really what this (comprehensive regional) plan is going to focus on --- that implementation strategy.

The other thing is --- I don't think we can be as bold as Daniel Burnham was, but that's our goal.

We had a meeting with our board to talk about where we're going, and they encouraged us not to think small. They want us to be bold --- but implementable. Not just dreams, but don't think inside what is today, but what can be over the next 20 and 30 years. That was very encouraging.

Question: Burnham was working in an ivory tower --- his studio on the roof of the Santa Fe Building --- and he was working with the Commercial Club, a bunch of bigwigs. He had meetings with Mayor Fred Busse and Ald. “Hinky Dink” Kenna. So, in producing the Plan, it was very much a top-down approach. It seems you’re talking about a more multi-faceted approach.

Answer: We definitely are. I said in a speech this morning that this isn’t CMAP’s plan. This is the region’s plan. It’s not us writing. It’s us inscribing what people are telling us. That’s really what this process over this summer especially is all about --- getting people to tell us about what their dreams for the future of Chicago are, how they want to see things change. It’s up to us to pull it together.

Is it more difficult? I think it probably is than in Daniel Burnham’s time when he and Bennett could sit upstairs in the Santa Fe Building and write. But, in today’s society, you have to bring the public, the residents, into the process.

We really want our residents, our business leaders, our civic leaders, our political leaders to have ownership of this plan. It’s not just us in the Sears Tower putting something together.

Question: You’re the focus of that planning, right? You’re going out there with scenarios so you’re starting with some basic framework.

Answer: We didn’t think it would be overly productive to take a blank sheet of paper out. We wanted to give our people something to react to. The nice thing about this process that we’re going through --- the Invent the Future process --- is that you can take the scenarios that we developed and then create your own. You don’t have to say, “I like A, B or C.”

I think that, ultimately, we won’t be at A, B or C in the scenarios. We’ll be combining all of them. It’s good that people can say, “Here’s what I like about scenario A, and here’s how I would create my scenario.” Although they’re not starting with a blank sheet, they can make their own, and we can see how that all comes together.

Question: Can you summarize scenarios A, B and C?

Answer: The three scenarios are entitled Reinvest, Innovate and Preserve.

Preserve is: Let's preserve what we have today. Let's build on that. But it's basically where we are now. It's very much focused on building on that. It's also things like preserving our education system.

Reinvest is: How do we build on existing communities? How do we reinvest in the communities we already have? Even the Schaumburgs of this world, in 30 years, are going to need reinvestment. How do we talk about a reinvestment strategy that uses the infrastructure that's already in place and builds on that? For example, we talk more about community parks in that one than we do about brand new open space out on the fringes.

Innovate is: How do we grow? We realize that we're going to grow --- some. So how do we do that in a way that makes sense? How do we make a new downtown? What does a new suburban downtown look like? It isn't Chicago density, but it is dense and has places where people want to come and stay.

Question: It's not an either/or sort of thing.

Answer: Absolutely. We wanted to give people an idea of what the trade-offs are.

That's really what this summer process is about. We're trading off decisions and policies and investments. So if you invest more in A, it means you have less to invest in B, and we really want to know what people think about those investments.

Question: It seems that so much of this is based on getting some sort of bubbling up from the residents of the region. Has this ever been done before in a region this big --- that someone's been able to get people so invested in an idea that officials have to go along with it?

Answer: Sacramento did a pretty nice job of this just a couple years ago in what I think they called their Blueprint Process. I don't know if it's been done in a region as complex and as large as Northeastern Illinois.

But it truly is important to us that we have that grassroots movement, that we give our elected officials and the people who are making decisions the sense of here's where we want to go as a region, that it's not a political question but a question of what does Chicago need, what does northeastern Illinois need to have great schools and great neighborhoods and great communities and good jobs and be truly a global leader in this 21st century.

(Next: *“People live regional lives”*)