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### Q&A with Randy Blankenhorn – “People live regional lives”

By Patrick T. Reardon on Mon., 07/06/2009 –9:56 am.

#### *Second of three parts*

Politics in Illinois is a take-no-prisoners blood sport so how can a bunch of nerdy planners make much of a difference?

The only way, says Randy Blankenhorn, executive director of the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP), is by developing grass-roots support and enlisting such heavy hitters as Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley.

Photo of Randy Blankenhorn, executive director of the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP) In this part of a wide-ranging interview in his Sears Tower office, Blankenhorn talks about political trade-offs, the potential for controversy and the goal of reaching consensus on a board with representatives from the city, suburban Cook County and the six collar counties.

Here’s an edited transcript:

Question: This is probably the most political place in the world, next to Washington, D.C. How do you build consensus in a region and a state where take-no-prisoners has long been the political approach?

Answer: One of the reasons we even exist is that our business community and our local elected officials and civic organizations understand that we are one region. That people live regional lives. They work in one place and live in another place and shop in another place. These arbitrary lines of communities are just that --- they’re arbitrary.

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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. [\[MORE\]](#)

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### 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. [\[MORE\]](#)

So our local elected officials really get that. They were the ones who pushed for a new agency. They are the ones pushing for a new vision. Certainly Mayor Daley's efforts to bring all the local governments together to talk about problems is a great start, and we're way ahead of what other regions are doing.

At the state level, we have problems, and they trickle down to us. But I think, here at the local and regional level, there's a real understanding that we have to work together if we're going to be successful.

We can't fight Schaumburg against Joliet against Waukegan for jobs. We're too busy fighting India, China and Brazil.

Question: But it will come down to a lot of politicians buying into the idea of trade-offs, right?

Answer: I don't know that that's any different from what it was in Daniel Burnham's day. This has always been a political city, a political region, and a political state. Absolutely, our political leaders have to buy into the results of this plan. For one thing, CMAP doesn't implement. We don't have land-use control. We don't have zoning authority.

Our local officials are going to have to say: Yes, this is in the best interests of the region which is, ultimately, in the best interests of my community.

Question: You need 12 votes out of 15 to get stuff passed by your board. It could end up being a real battle. Will 80 percent approval requirement become a focal point for controversy or consensus?

Answer: I do have a sense that we'll be able to work out consensus. It's important that we bring the board along every step of the way, that we're not so far out in front of them in what we're thinking and what we're hearing from the public that we surprise them.

They're certainly well-briefed at every meeting they have on what's happening in the policy issues that we're facing. We've tried to get them, on a number of policies, to talk about principles that they think are important and that kind of frame the discussions that we want to have. So that's helped guide the staff in some of the thinking.

I'll give you an example. We just approved last week the Developments of Regional Importance process (a process for dealing with large-scale housing projects), which is part of our state legislative mandate.

It took about two years to get this done. A month ago, we were going to approve it, and one of our members asked if he could have another month to sit down with me one more time with his constituents to try to work out any last details because he wanted it to be a unanimous vote.

That's where we're at with our board in general. They want to find a way to work together. They want to find a way not to have this be a 13-2 vote or even a 14-1 vote. They want to find a way to real consensus.

Question: Mayor Daley is someone with a lot of clout, of course. Do you have a sense of how much he'll let this happen?

Answer: One of his deputy chiefs-of-staff is our vice chairman. He's always had one of his close personal aides as part of our process, as an integral part of our process. That's critically important.

We've had real success working not only with the mayor's office but getting direction from the mayor's office to the city agencies about how they need to be involved, that they need to be part of this process and not just watching it from afar. That's going to go a long way in building the city's confidence in where we're heading.

Certainly, the way we're structured, the mayor has a third of the votes on our board, or his appointments have a third of the votes.

Question: So he could block anything he wanted. But, if he wants to push something, how much sway does he have with other members from the collar counties and suburban Cook County? How much do they look to him?

Answer: There's a good relationship that's been built over the last several years between the mayor and the suburbs. They certainly respect what he's trying to do here in the city. The suburban leaders appreciate the fact that the mayor's thinking beyond city boundaries and how things that he's doing impact the region.

They also understand that suburban Kane County is not the same as the city of Chicago, and that what's going to be a good part of this plan and might work downtown or in our neighborhoods in the city won't work in our communities in Kane, Kendall and Will Counties. So, while they appreciate the leadership the mayor shows, they also represent a different constituency.

Question: Have voting blocs developed on the board?

Answer: We have a lot of votes but, with very few exceptions, they've all been unanimous. The only issue that we've had that hasn't been unanimous is the acquisition of the EJ&E (the Elgin, Joliet & Eastern Railroad) by the Canadian National Railway (for use by freight trains).

That was one where we did not get 12 votes either way. It ended up 11-4 in favor.

It ended up with the collar counties voting against it, but it wasn't so much a collar county bloc as it was that those were the communities that are impacted, those are the ones that had negative impacts while Cook County and the city had positive impacts. The result was we didn't take an official position on the sale.

*(NEXT: "Not going to get a second chance")*