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### Q&A with Randy Blankenhorn – “Not going to get a second chance”

By Patrick T. Reardon on Wed., 07/082009 –9:27 am.

#### *Third of three parts*

Randy Blankenhorn knows that expectations of him and his agency are high. That’s what you get when you follow in Daniel Burnham’s footsteps.

As the executive director of the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP), he’s overseeing an effort that seeks to bring logic to planning in the Chicago metropolitan region.

In this final installment from a wide-ranging interview in his Sears Tower office, Blankenhorn talks about his roots in McHenry, the “hammer” that his agency wields and comparisons with Burnham, the author of the Plan of Chicago, published 100 years ago.

Here’s an edited transcript:

Question: What is your background?



Answer: I’m 50. I went to school at Illinois State in Bloomington. I was a business and political science major. I went to work for the state of Illinois right out of college and worked at a number of agencies for the first three or four years, and then moved to the IDOT (the Illinois Department of Transportation) in the mid-1980s. I was there for 20-some years.

I grew up in McHenry, in the city of McHenry. When I grew up, there were 8,000 people. Now it’s 30,000. All

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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. [\[MORE\]](#)

of my family but me still live there. I live here in the city. I live in Streeterville. I can walk to work on a nice day.

Most of the time I was with the state, I lived in a town called Petersburg which is where Lincoln's New Salem is. When I moved here, I think there were more people who lived in my apartment building than there were who lived in my town. It was a bit of an adjustment.

Question: When you were toiling away at IDOT, did you ever envision yourself heading an agency like CMAP?

Answer: I like to tell the story that, when I was part of the state's effort to create CMAP --- I was IDOT's bureau chief of urban planning --- and getting all of our local officials to agree about what it would look like and that it would have this voting structure that requires 12 out of 15 votes --- I always say: If I had known I was going to be the executive director, I would have written the responsibilities a lot differently. Even as we were creating this agency, it never occurred to me that I would come here to lead it.

It's an honor to be here. It's an exciting time to build something here. We have so many talented people who work here. It's a joy to work with them. They're smart, they're energetic. We had someone say today that we're doing important things, and we're having fun doing it. I think that's the key to the staff here.

They realize that this plan is a big deal. In all honesty, the whole country is watching to see if it can be done here in Chicago. Maybe you can do it in Portland, but it's hard to do in a region like ours, and they figure, if it can happen in Chicago, it can happen in their region as well.

The staff gets it that we're under the microscope, not only inside this region but outside, and how important it is for us to be successful the first time around. We're not going to get a second chance to do the first plan.

Question: You don't have zoning and land-use control, and yet the goal is a holistic approach to planning.

Answer: We used to create regional plans around the transportation plans. We decided what (transportation) projects we wanted to build, and then we created a (regional) plan around them.

We're a year and five months away from (final approval of) the plan, and we have not talked about capital projects yet --- because we're saying that capital

projects have to support the regional vision, not the other way around.

That's where we do have some influence in saying, "This is where we think transportation investments should go" which certainly has an impact on development and land use, which certainly has an impact on our economic viability.

If we do have any hammer, if we have any ability to influence, it's through the use of the transportation dollars.

Question: As I understand it, each year, you will rank the transportation projects based on how well they serve other purposes as well as transportation.

Answer: Absolutely. There are two processes in the transportation programming. There's the (transportation) plan which will be part of our overall (regional) plan. It won't stand alone. And then the (transportation) program which is shorter-term and deals with what we are going to build over the next five years.

We're going to be pretty clear: We have this plan. We have this direction that we want to go, and transportation can certainly make that happen. Projects need to support that direction.

Question: In an indirect way, you'll do zoning because, in order for a municipality to get its transportation project ranked high, its zoning and land use will have to fit into the plan.

Answer: We hope that the plan influences it directly. We hope that municipalities and counties will look at the regional plan, look at the transportation elements in it, and say, "OK. I'm going to have this kind of transportation system. What does my community need to look like to utilize that to the best of our ability?" So we hope that it's really a kind of direct influence on decisions.

Our goal isn't to tell people "no." Our goal is to have them say: "How am I best going to fit my investments into the strategy to implement this plan?" We think we are already seeing a whole lot of thinking that is different.

Question: We're at a moment when everything's frozen in terms of housing development. But what's the future of sprawl here?

Answer: This plan will have a significant discussion about what the region thinks about growth in general. I think the future is how we build our existing communities. That doesn't mean that existing communities on the fringes of our region aren't going to grow. They're going to have to if we're going to have an additional 2.8 million people (projected by 2040).

How we grow, we hope, will be much more logical. When we talk about growth, we have to talk about what we can do with our existing communities. How do we grow in a way that makes sense --- that makes sense to them and that makes sense from a regional perspective?

This summer, we're going to use the word "density" a lot. The word "density" scares a lot of people.

We need to make it clear that, when we're out in my hometown of McHenry, that we're not talking about densities like this building. We're talking about (an increase in population density) that makes sense for them, that maybe gives public transit a better chance to succeed, that makes it so that, in these communities, people can walk downtown again, like they did when I was a kid. Making sure we have amenities like sidewalks.

We want to talk about densities that are appropriate for the community. How many different types of densities will we be talking about? Suburban Cook densities probably won't work in Kane County, but do we need the kind of (low) density that we have out there today? Can we continue to support that kind of density? There might be 3, 4, 5, 6 tiers of density that we end up talking about in this plan and trying to figure out with the communities --- not us telling the community --- what works best for them.

Question: When I was still at the Chicago Tribune, Charles Leroux and I wrote about the many people who moved to the edges of suburbia and caused sprawl because they were looking for "the most house for the money." Their goal was a big house, a new house. Can your plan temper that deep-felt desire?

Answer: There will always be that deep-felt desire for big houses and new houses. We're going to have to figure out how to accommodate that in some way.

The market was what the market was, and we over-encouraged people to get into more than they should have. As we look at the size of houses over the next decade or so when this market turns around, I think you're going to see smaller homes on smaller lots because it's going to be much more affordable.

And you're going to be able to get new homes in established communities (away from the fringes), so we want to plan for that.

Question: You're at a moment in history and in the middle of a process which could result in sweeping changes in the way this region plans and the way people in the region live. Down the line, if this works, you're likely to be called the new Burnham. Any thoughts?

Answer: That's a scary thing. We don't pretend to be Daniel Burnham. However, we do want to live in that spirit. We do want to be bold. We do want to think about how this can truly make a difference, and we do hope that this is a significant changing plan.

This plan is called GO-TO-2040, but I refer to it as a plan for the 21st century because that's what I think it is.

It scares us a little. The expectations are incredibly high. But I think that's what people want. They want a new way of thinking. They want to think about their region in a different way.