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Q&A with George Ranney: “A great map of what you want”

By Patrick T. Reardon on Wed., 07/29/2009 –9:43 am.

George Ranney’s roots in regional planning go back to the 1970s when he headed the task force that created the RTA. Now, he’s hoping that another new regional agency, the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP), will have a similar impact on the metro area.

Indeed, he says CMAP has the potential to be as important and influential for improving life in the region as the Chicago Plan Commission was in transforming the city over the past century. A product of the Burnham Plan, the commission was the driving force behind the many Plan recommendations that became reality. It helped create a more efficient, healthier and more beautiful city.

Ranney is the president and CEO of [Chicago Metropolis 2020](#), a business-based organization formed by the Commercial Club of Chicago (the same group that commissioned the Burnham Plan) to work to make the Chicago region more competitive globally. He is also the co-chair of the Burnham Plan Centennial, the host of this blog.



Chicago Metropolis 2020 led the successful effort to create and fund CMAP. A key provision in that legislation was to give the new agency the power to prioritize transportation projects. That means --- in theory, at least --- that it will determine which projects get federal funding and which don’t.

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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. [\[MORE\]](#)

The agency plans to take a holistic approach in making those decisions, considering a wide variety of issues, such as housing, public transportation and open space.

During an interview, Ranney talked about CMAP, the two Mayor Daleys and the virtue of planning. Here is an edited transcript:

Question: Why is planning important?

Answer: If you don't plan, you can make bad mistakes.

The lesson of Burnham and his plan is that it's possible to get people to envision and agree about what should be done. If you do that with a plan, people can agree or disagree with it. They can participate in putting it together. You end up with a really great map of what it is you want to happen.

That's particularly important for structures --- roads, parks, the sites of buildings. For deciding whether you want to have a road or a transit line.

Burnham was successful in getting people to really engage in the ideas he wanted them to think about.

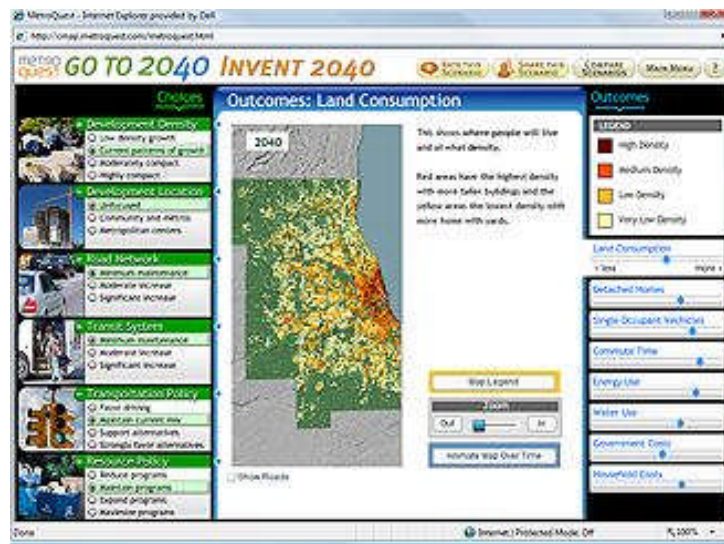
Question: It seems that, if change is going to happen now like it did a century ago with the Burnham Plan, it will only happen if CMAP is able to carry out its legislative mandate in developing its comprehensive plan for the region, GO TO 2040.

Answer: We worked really hard to get it created and to become effective. We think it can make a big, big difference. We have not prioritized how our investments are made in the region very well. Hopefully, CMAP can help us do that --- starting with federal dollars and then, by doing that, having a substantial impact on where local government dollars and private dollars are spent.



I've been a big believer in a regional planning agency, going back to the 1960s. We've got to do a better job of making sure that dollars are spent on transportation where it will really benefit housing, and vice versa. And CMAP is a way to do that.

CMAP is the modern-day incarnation of the Chicago Plan Commission. That was what we saw for it. That's our hope.



Question: One of the areas being emphasized as part of the Burnham Plan Centennial is the completion of trails -- whether it's completing the 30-miles of parkland along Chicago's entire lakefront or linking bike trails throughout the city and suburbs. Is this an attempt to provide something to pique the interest of everyday people to get involved in the planning process?

Answer: Yes. And to lead to something real. People get cynical about life as it is. They need to recognize the opportunities they have to determine how public infrastructure is built or how investments are made. The fact is: They can do that. They can have a major impact.

Question: You headed the task force that established the RTA in the 1970s. What were the lessons learned in that about regional planning?

Answer: We did a really good job of creating a state-of-the-art piece of legislation, and we got a lot of it through the legislature. We benefitted that about half the population was in the suburbs and about half in the city. There was [city-suburban] mistrust, but one side or the other wasn't able to take advantage.

There was a lot of suspicion of Mayor Richard J. Daley and the city. The RTA was overwhelmingly voted down in the suburbs. It only passed because it was strongly supported by Mayor Daley.

We realized later that we got the policies ahead of the people and the politics. That it's important for the people to understand what's at stake. It was very, very destructive in the 1980s when the RTA became a heated political issue.

[But passing the RTA legislation] showed that a big idea like the RTA can be successful. And that a big idea like CMAP can be successful. And that a big idea like getting a lot more people to use public transportation can be successful.

It was Richard J. Daley who made it possible for the RTA to come into existence. It's his son, Richard M. Daley, who is now working with suburban mayors.