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CMAP and a new sort of region

By Patrick T. Reardon on Fri, 12/04/2009 – 8:50 am.

On the first page of the document, the statement is clearly made:

“Every decision requires trade-offs...”

It’s a truism, of course. But it’s a sober reminder for us, as a region, at this key moment in our history.

The document is called “DRAFT: Preferred Regional Scenario,” and it’s from the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP).

Okay, “Preferred Regional Scenario” is an awkward term. Maybe the CMAP planners have been talking a bit too much to each other.

What they’re trying to say is that this is a word picture of how CMAP thinks the region should look in the future. This picture will be used in 2010 to create the first comprehensive plan for the Chicago region --- the GO TO 2040 plan. A draft of that plan will be made public in May and is scheduled to be finalized by next October.

All that may sound like a lot of planning mumbo-jumbo. But it’s important. Very important.

A new sort of region

CMAP is envisioning a Chicago region that is significantly different from the one we have today. And this new sort of region is what the agency will work to create over the next 30 years.

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Next year, in the GO TO 2040 plan, the agency will spell out specific policies and investments that it will support in the coming decades. Unlike earlier planning groups, CMAP has the economic clout --- on paper, at least --- to implement those policies and investments.

The agency has the power to rank transportation projects seeking federal funding. Those at the top of the list are likely to get money. Those lower down, not. CMAP officials say that the rankings will be based on how well each project fits into a broader, more holistic local plan, advancing the overall goals of GO TO 2040.

In other words, how well each project helps create the new, improved region that CMAP envisions --- the region as sketched out in the “Preferred Regional Scenario.”

So, what kind of region is CMAP envisioning?

What’s “critical” to the future

Well, the document described four things as “critical” to creating the new sort of region in the future:

- + Denser development in established communities, featuring a mix of housing types.
- + Improved public transportation.
- + Ranking investments, such as new roads or rail lines, based on their long-term impact.
- + Investment in poor communities to improve infrastructure and strengthen the labor force.

What CMAP’s priorities are

The “Preferred Regional Scenario” also lists two items as priorities and one as a goal:

- + Priority: to preserve and maintain the existing infrastructure --- both the “gray” infrastructure of sewers, roads and such, as well as the “green” infrastructure of meadows, woods and similar natural areas.
- + Priority: to increase the amount of parks and open space in the region as a way of expanding the green infrastructure and extending greater access to nature to more people.

+ Goal: the reduction of poverty.

What it will look like

Obviously, it's hard to say exactly how all this will pan out. The GO TO 2040 plan will give many more details. Then, there's the question of the impact politics will have on what eventually gets done. Or not done.

But it's possible to sketch out a broad-stroke picture of the region of the future according to CMAP.

The governmental leaders of the Chicago region, under this vision (or scenario), will find ways to focus the building of more new housing and the creation of more new businesses into the empty areas of established communities. This will be fill-in construction.

For this to work, those leaders will have to overcome the economic realities that land at the edge of the region is cheaper than land in the already developed areas and that it's cheaper for a developer to construct 200 homes on one large plot rather than 20 homes each at 10 locations.

Those leaders will also find ways to encourage the mixing of housing types on the same blocks or in the same subdivisions.

This is a very democratic goal although it runs counter to more than half a century of suburban expansion. The trend over that time was to build a subdivision with dozens or hundreds of copies of essentially the same home, offered at essentially the same price. Those who moved into the subdivision were segregating themselves economically.

It also runs counter to the desires of many local officials who have wanted high-priced homes in order to reap higher tax revenues. So the tendency of developers has been to build expensive homes, thereby pricing the lower middle class and low-income people out of much of the housing market.

A mix of housing types would make it possible for those lower middle class and low-income people to live in a lot more places. And it would make it possible for them to live closer to their jobs --- reducing their commuting time and reducing the wear and tear on highways and reducing air pollution.

A critical mass

So CMAP is picturing denser suburban developments. Certainly not as dense as a Chicago neighborhood, but more dense than a Yorkville subdivision circa 2007.

This greater density will create a critical mass that makes public transportation a more attractive alternative to more people. Many of these mixed-housing developments would be near train stations or along bus or rapid transit routes. Residents would be able to walk to their bus or train.

The residents would also form a critical mass of consumers who would be attractive to stores and restaurants that would cluster near the train stations or other public transit hubs. So residents could walk to the store or for a bite to eat as well.

CMAP sees walk-ability as an improvement in the quality of life. It breaks down the isolation that takes place when people go everywhere in their autos, often alone. The more people walk and bicycle, the more they're protecting the environment.

This, of course, goes against more than 50 years of an American culture based on the car --- on the independence it provides and the freedom and flexibility it brings. That car culture won't disappear overnight, even if CMAP can make a dent in it.

One way of putting a brake on car usage is to tax vehicles based on how many miles they travel and at peak or off-peak times. This sort of "congestion pricing" is an option that CMAP says needs to be explored.

Sprawl won't disappear either. CMAP planners acknowledge that, with the addition of more than two million new residents over the next three decades, construction will still take place at the far edge of suburbia.

Saving money and the environment

Yet, CMAP argues that clustering a mix of housing types (and people with a mix of incomes) saves money and the environment. It's better not only for the people who live there but also for the entire region.

Similarly, under CMAP's vision, the entire region benefits if low-income people are helped to become better educated, better trained and better employed. Not only will they bring new energy to the region's economy, but, with higher incomes, they'll be able to spend more throughout the seven-county area.

So, when CMAP talks about investing in poor communities and reducing poverty, it is aiming to create a region where as many people as possible take part in its economic life. That makes good business sense.

But it also goes to the heart of the American idea.

In its "Preferred Regional Scenario," CMAP writes that the region it envisions "will be a more equitable place to live and work."

Fair

Equity is difficult to pin down. It's not like a road or a sewer or a townhouse or a bus or a greenway. It sparks strong emotional reactions. It's a goal that can never be reached. Nothing that humans do is ever perfectly fair.

Maybe it's the impossible dream of the CMAP planning.

Yet, it's important to remember that fairness was a key element of the 1909 Plan of Chicago, written by Daniel Burnham and co-author Edward Bennett.

The Plan summed up its aims this way:

"In creating the ideal arrangement [of the city], everyone who lives here is better accommodated in his business and his social activities. In bringing about better freight and passenger facilities, every merchant and manufacturer is helped.

"In establishing a complete park and parkway system, the life of the wage-earner and of his family is made healthier and pleasanter; while the greater attractiveness thus produced keeps at home the people of means and taste, and acts as a magnet to draw those who seek to live amid pleasing surroundings.

"The very beauty that attracts him who has money makes pleasant the life of those among whom he lives, while anchoring him and his wealth to the city.

“The prosperity aimed at is for all Chicago.” (Italics added)

Burnham and his generation were successful in improving the prosperity of the city and region --- and in improving the lives of all residents.

If we as a region are going to work together to improve our transportation, housing, environment and economy, shouldn't we follow Burnham's lead?

Shouldn't we also work together to make things as fair as possible?

This coming year will give a strong indication of how much we want to work together and how willing we are to make the trade-offs necessary to create a better region.

And how fair we want that region to be.

Next: The next Burnham