

[Note from Committee staff liaison Stephen Ostrander: At the July meeting of the CMAP Land Use Committee, Norm West indicated that his concern about the land use impact of two transportation projects in our region led him to question what is—or should be—the role of our committee in addressing such projects. As a result, Norm asked that the committee take some time at our September meeting to discuss this question. Below are some initial thoughts he wanted to offer to help initiate and focus the discussion of this question.—S.O.]

To: CMAP Land Use Committee

From: Norman West, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

Date: September 2011

Re: Role of Committee in Addressing Regional Land Use Concerns Raised by Local Transportation Projects *(for discussion)*

General problem statement:

Even the most urban areas of the world are dependent upon the ecosystems within which they were built, and our region is no exception. However, within the ecosystem of the region, our attention has typically been narrowly focused on its human inhabitants. In considering connectivity, we have come to appreciate that special consideration must be paid to a wide variety of different needs, such as poorer residents who cannot afford to own a car, bicyclists, or even the specialized logistics systems and infrastructure necessary for the movement of freight.

But the health of our region also depends on the connectivity of its other living inhabitants. Just as humans need to connect to family, friends, jobs, recreation, food and retail supplies, so too plants, animals, aquatics and subterranean inhabitants require connectivity to their mandatory needs, or they will perish.

To the remarkable credit of our forefathers, great parcels of land were set aside in Cook County to be retained as natural areas for these ecosystem populations, and until the 1960's, they provided sufficient habitat connections. However, the “growth rings” of outer suburban development are filling in outside this “green belt,” cutting off its connections to the south, west and north. Looking at a greenway map of the region, one sees that it is now virtually impossible for an animal to reach the Lake Michigan shore, from Michigan around to north of Milwaukee. It is also becoming so restricted that they can hardly reach the Fox River from the west, or the Des Plaines from the south.

In short, much of our region's ecosystem has been paved over, and despite admirable efforts to create new parks and green space, nature cannot survive or be managed in one-block parks scattered across the region (with location often determined by calculations of their “optimal proximity” to people).

Today, there is still time to retain some corridors of green infrastructure connectivity, but the window of opportunity is closing. We need to:

1. Dramatically increase regional awareness of the situation.
2. Undertake purposeful efforts to avoid further loss of green infrastructure connectivity for this ecosystem population.
3. Focus attention on identifying regionally prudent (sustainable) solutions, possibly including restoring some critical areas of the ecosystem.
4. Find ways to fund and implement needed changes in future developments of the urban region, so that the connectivity needs of all populations are adequately considered and met.

Two specific projects:

At past meetings of the Land Use Committee, I have mentioned two specific projects which to me are representative of some problems. Those projects are the Illiana Corridor proposal and the IL Route 47 upgrading (which takes the role of the former Prairie Parkway proposal). These two projects have the potential to sever ecosystem connectivity south and west of the CMAP region, respectively.

Right now, the Illiana Corridor is undertaking a Tier I EIS, so it is by definition a DRI. Yet has—or will—the Land Use Committee ever give any input to this major land use project? Not by our current operating procedures. Why not? How could we? Regarding connectivity, if we agree with the GO TO 2040 plan what should the committee concerns be? My understanding of the plan's recommendations leads me to believe that we should advocate that the Illiana Corridor contribute significantly to the regional Green Infrastructure, as opposed to paving a path that fragments the region.

IL Route 47, on the other hand, is being done in “small pieces,” so it will never come to CMAP as a DRI. Yet it will have the same level of impacts to regional connectivity on the west side as the Illiana Corridor could on the south side.

Town and county plans all say they seek to retain open space, yet their plats of property development fail to do so because each local municipality is competing to get its “share” of the Route 47 revenue, as happened along Randall Road. The many “small” Route 47 projects are approved through CMAP /MPO, but are too small to appear on the major projects listing.

General discussion questions for the CMAP Land Use Committee:

Considering the impact of projects such as these on land use, what *should* be the role of the CMAP Land Use Committee? How *can* the committee address the regional land use concerns raised by projects overseen by CMAP / MPO?