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['Burnham Plan II' up for final vote — and may be just as big as original](#)

Posted by Greg H. at 9/27/2010 11:20 AM CDT

They're calling it "the most significant plan" for the Chicago area since Daniel Burnham's a century ago — and they might be right.

But planning and doing aren't necessarily the same in this town, as the board of Chicago Metropolitan Area for Planning the week after next prepares to vote on and adopt its [Go To 2040 plan](#) to guide just about every aspect of Chicago-area development in coming decades.

At its core, the plan represents one gigantic bet that a region often fractured with rivalries has grown up, that it is willing to put aside internal wars and unite behind some sensible goals to help metropolitan Chicago compete against other global centers that lately have been literally eating our lunch.

In that vein, it calls for keeping zoning power local but consolidating local governments and government functions to keep costs down. It urges fewer big-lot homes but more public park space — "People are willing to give up part of their backyard, but only in exchange for parks," CMAP Executive Director Randy Blankenhorn says — and less raiding of jobs and tax revenue by town against town.

In part, the plan is a political document that pulls its punches a bit in the name of consensus. Ergo, it punts a decision on how to revamp the state's woefully outmoded tax structure to an outside panel of experts, but strongly suggests that those involved move away from a flat income tax and expand the state's sales tax to include fast-growing services.

"This is not a plan for the next four years," Mr. Blankenhorn responds when asked about the possibility of expanding any tax in today's political environment.

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But if "consensus" is the principle that guides much of the document, CMAP made some real, tough decisions in the area in which it has real power: allocating available federal transportation funds.

Traditionally, the Chicago area has engaged in a mad, often chaotic food fight when the feds make big money available, with the city and the suburbs, Chicago Transit Authority and Metra each calling in their chits from local congressmen.

CMAP, to its credit, charts a different path in Go To 2040.

Acknowledging that federal transportation funds likely are to remain limited for quite a while, it proposes to fund five, and only five, "new start" projects here for the time being: the Elgin/O'Hare expressway to open western access to O'Hare International Airport; extending the CTA's Red Line south to the city limits; extending Illinois 53 into Lake County; building an interchange at the junction of Interstates 57 and 294, and developing a West Loop transit center that would anchor new high-speed rail here.

Environmentalists will like much of that, but they'll hate the Illinois 53 extension. But all of the above is needed, Mr. Blankenhorn says. The extension can be more parkway than a big-concrete swath if handled correctly, he adds.

At the same time, says CMAP Chairman Gerald Bennett, the mayor of Palos Hills, the region needs to cut its transit-funding reliance on Uncle Sam and work harder to build public/private partnerships that work — for instance, reserving some expressway lanes strictly for trucks.

Like I said, one big bet that the region has grown up. Or, as Mr. Bennett put it, "We no longer can build a 2,000-home development at the edge of town and not take into account the cost of extending services there." Such waste costs money and makes Chicago less able to fend off more efficient metros elsewhere.

He's right and so, for the most part, appears to be the plan. We'll have to see how far it gets but, for whatever it's worth, some of Mr. Burnham's ideas are bearing fruit only now.

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