Chicago Tribune Magazine
JANUARY 11, 2009

Trib

* Can the White City become a Green Region?
* 3 local visionaries offer blueprints

THE FUTURE OF CHICAGO

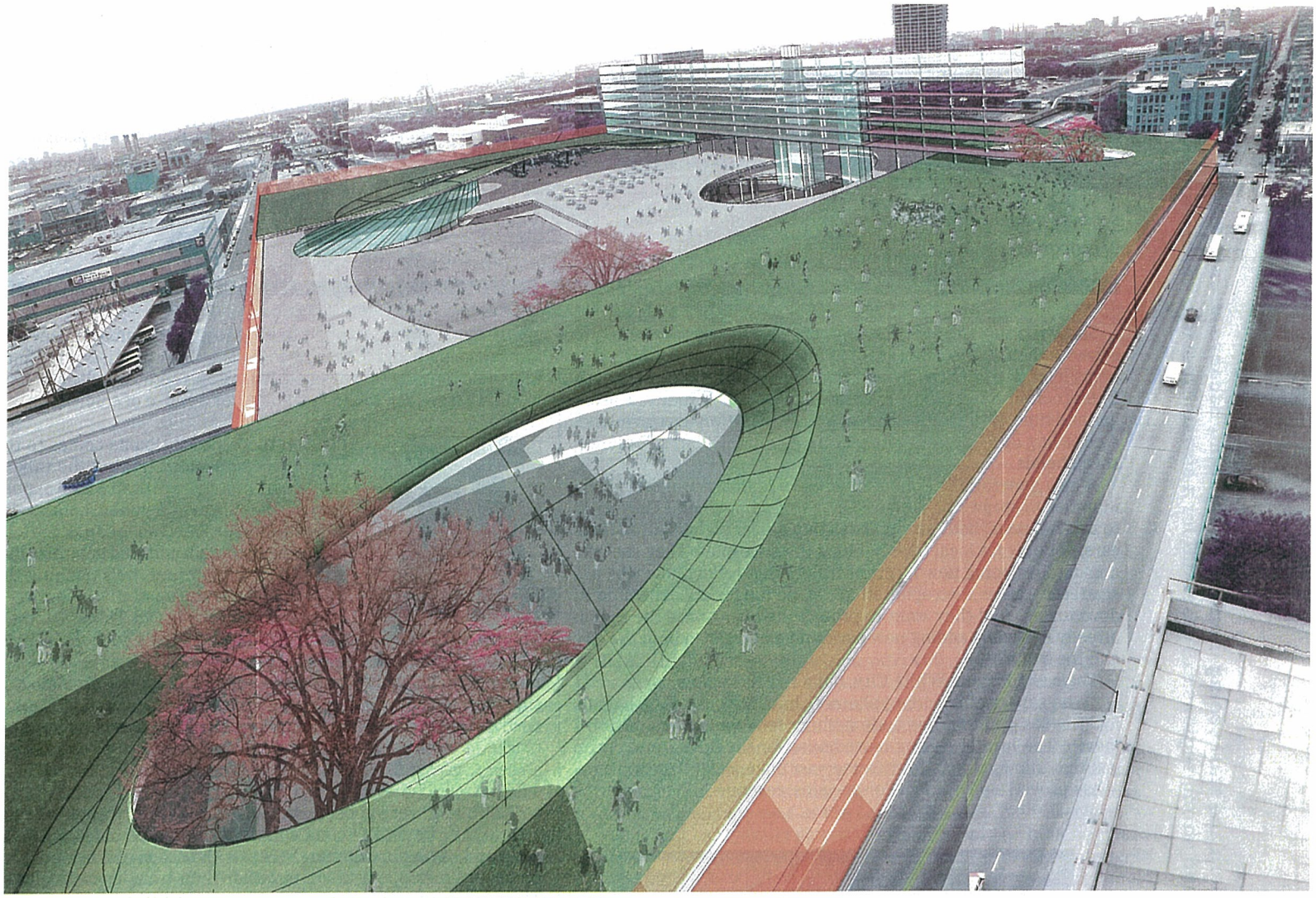
It's been a century since Daniel Burnham's grand plan laid the foundation for our metropolis. What will it be like in another 50 years?

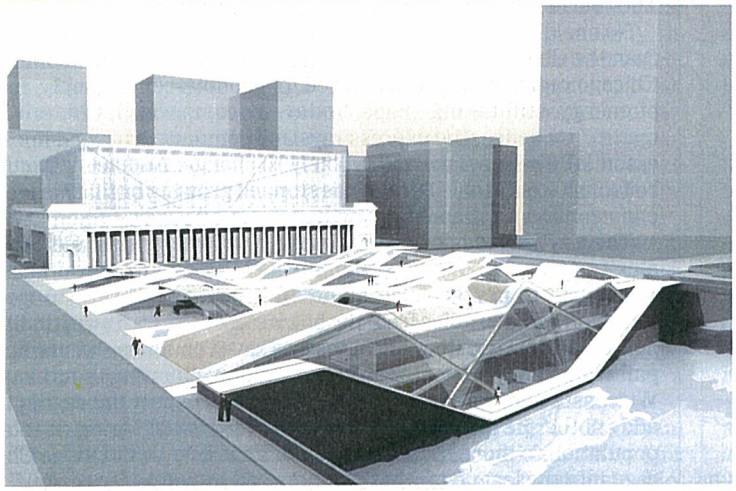
GOING FORWARD

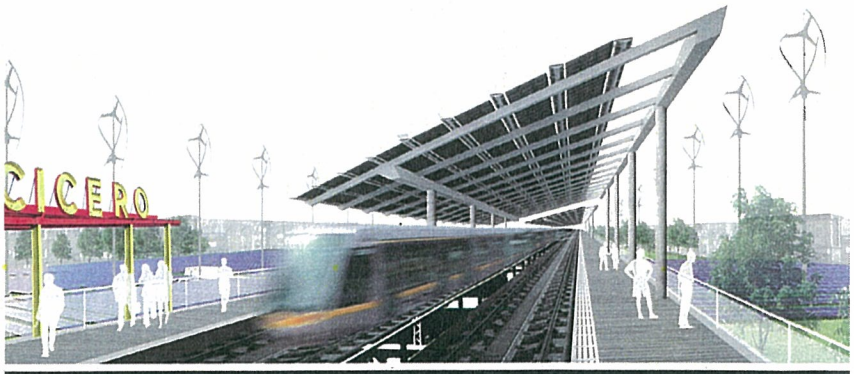
Planning for Chicago's future requires Burnham-style vision —and a big pair of green-tinted glasses

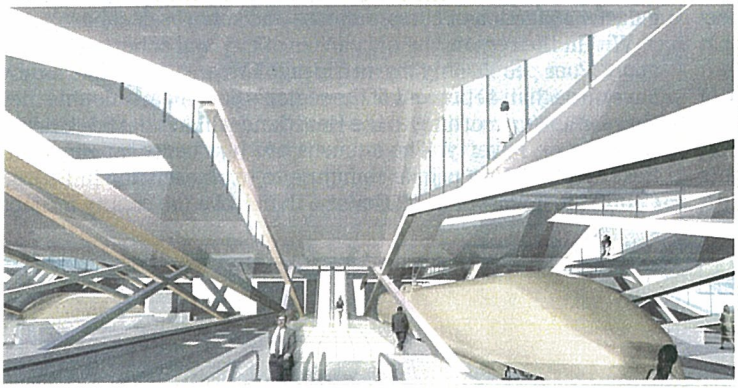
This could be a smashing year for Chicago, but not only for the reasons—including Barack Obama's inauguration—that probably come to mind. Specifically, 2009 could make a historic mark because it will give the residents of Chicago and its vast metropolitan area a chance to start a civic conversation about how we live, how we grow and whether the mass suburban sprawl of the last few decades still makes sense in the era of declining fossil fuel supplies and global warming. There's a marvelous excuse to have this conversation. The region will be celebrating the 100th anniversary of one of the greatest city plans in history. The Burnham Plan, named for its principal author, the Chicago architect and urban planner Daniel Burnham, was formally unveiled in 1909 and proceeded to transform Chicago, then one of the ugliest cities in the world, into one of the most beautiful. Published as a book and filled with seductive renderings by artists such as Jules Guerin, it proceeded to endow the city with its renowned, nearly continuous chain of lakefront parks as well as a host of marquee public works, from Navy Pier to double-decked Wacker Drive. More important, it permanently encoded in Chicago's DNA the notion that change of any sort is possible, as long as it is backed by sufficient architectural vision, political muscle and piles of money (think Millennium Park). The plan's centennial, then, all but invites new forms of visionary thinking, even if the document and the extraordinary results it achieved set a daunting standard.

BY **BLAIR KAMIN**









FUTURESCAPE
Counterclockwise from top: In the exhibition "Burnham 2.0" at the Chicago History Museum, architects envision a park above the notorious Circle interchange west of downtown; a competition-winning plan in the show calls for a high-speed rail hub east of Union Station and beneath a folded green roof. The hub would link to watertaxis; the rail hub's skylit interior would resemble a sleek airport terminal, glamorizing rail travel; among the show's finest concepts is the vision for a "Mid-City Transitway," consisting of a new transit line, green technology factories and open space along Cicero Avenue.

America needs "to stop seeing our cities as the problem and start seeing them as the solution, because strong cities are the building blocks of strong regions, and strong regions are essential for a strong America." --President-elect Barack Obama

And what sort of thinking is bubbling around? ■ In a word, it's green—a color-coded vision that, like Burnham's utopian "White City" of the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, thoroughly reflects the urban aspirations of its time. ■ If the ideal in 1893 was to bring order to the chaotic industrial city through a monumental, all-encompassing environment of Beaux-Arts design, the goal of many of today's planners, architects, business and political leaders is tinged with an environmental sensibility born of frustration with the relentless, low-density spread of homes—sprawl—ever farther from Chicago. This frustration is not the result of snobbery, as sprawl's defenders argue. Rather, it is the product of a conservation ethic that characterizes sprawl as wasteful, particularly at a time of economic crisis.

Sprawl forces the building of new streets, roads, sewers and schools when much of our existing infrastructure is crumbling. It helps lead to traffic congestion that fouls the air and costs each Chicago-area commuter hundreds of dollars each year in wasted gas and time. It chews up acres of precious Midwestern farmland. And it has human costs, separating people instead of building social bonds.

A new generation of planners prefers compact, walkable communities to sprawling, auto-dependent developments. They want to use rail lines, both new and existing, to get people out of their cars, not only for local trips but long-distance ones. They see wisdom in developing new forms of transit that reflect how jobs are scattered across metropolitan areas, no longer concentrated in downtowns. And they want to protect the open space the region already has while adding new parkland and trails in both the city and the suburbs.

Their aim is not a White City, but a Green Region.

To be sure, well-meaning planners have advocated such goals for decades and that has done nothing to stop sprawl's outward march. The lure of getting more house for the buck—and cheap gas that allows people to traverse vast distance at little expense—has proved a potent foe. For decades, revenue-hungry suburbs have approved office buildings, factories and shopping malls as if each community were an island, ignoring the regional consequences of their actions. What's different this time around is that there's a change in the air and in the halls of power.

SLEEPY SUBURBIA? Not in Naperville. The downtown is nearly always bustling, and offers dozens of restaurants and major chain stories, as well as a riverwalk, a new concert hall and the DuPage Children's Museum.

The green movement has infiltrated mass culture. Think of all those hybrid electric cars, energy-saving lightbulbs and green roofs, like the one atop Chicago's City Hall. Within the suburbs, communities like Naperville, Evanston and Arlington Heights have been carving out mixed-use hubs that combine restaurants, shops, entertainment and in-town living. Urban analyst Joel Kotkin calls this trend "the new localism," and predicts that hard economic times may accelerate it as people tighten belts and look to Main Street, not the global stage, for a sense of connection.

And then there's this: Obama comes to the White House at least talking the talk of the "smart growth" advocates who oppose sprawl. He supports neighborhoods with sidewalks, for one, so people will be encouraged to walk and lead healthier lifestyles. More important, he's pushing the idea that the traditional divide between cities and suburbs is Old Think. His New Think is that economies are regional and what's good for a city is also good for suburbs, and vice versa.

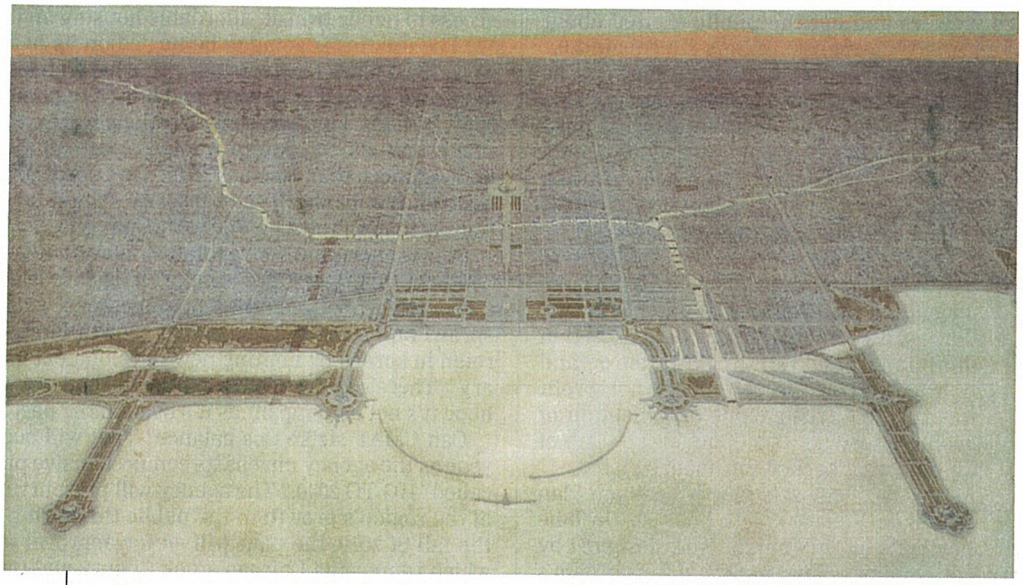
America needs "to stop seeing our cities as the problem and start seeing them as the solution," Obama told the U.S. Conference of Mayors last June, "because strong cities are the building blocks of strong regions, and strong regions are essential for a strong America. That is the new metropolitan reality and we need a new strategy that reflects it."

Which is all very good, except smart-growth advocates already are taking shots at Obama's multibillion-dollar infrastructure program, saying it will merely repair the roads and bridges that undergird metropolitan areas rather than transforming sprawl. They're all but calling him "President Pothole."

No one disputes that today's Chicago is a vastly different place than the Chicago of Daniel Burnham's time. In 1909, the booming Chicago region could be compared to an adolescent—gangly, full of energy, still taking shape. Today, by comparison, Chicago is mature, its bones (the expressways and commuter railroad lines) essentially set in place and unlikely to change. And yet, it would be foolish to say that Chicago has stopped growing or that we lack opportunities to shape its growth.

The city presides over a region of bewildering size and complexity. It sweeps in an arc along Lake Michigan from southeast Wisconsin to northwest Indiana and reaches outward to rich farmland some 60 miles from the black stalk of Sears Tower. In Illinois alone, this territory encompasses seven counties, 283 municipalities and 8.5 million people—9.3 million, counting southeast Wisconsin and northwest Indiana. Planners expect the region to add another 2.8 million people by 2040, which would bring its total population to more than 11.3 million. That leap would move Chicago into the league of what planners call a "mega-city region," a galactic collection of cities, suburbs and suburbs of suburbs.

Within the region, the old cliches of city and suburb no longer apply. Poor people only live in Chicago? Wrong. The suburbs now have more than 40 percent of the region's poor, nearly double their share in 1980, according to the Heartland Alliance's Mid-America Institute on Poverty. The suburbs are just bedroom communities? Wrong. More people commute to work each day in DuPage County, just west of Cook County, than leave the county for jobs.



LOOKING WEST This Jules Guerin rendition from the Burnham Plan of Chicago shows a proposed Civic Center with a domed City Hall (center) near what is today the Circle Interchange. It was never built.

For more about the Burnham Plan centennial, go to architecture critic Blair Kamin's Chicago Tribune blog, "The Skyline," at chicagotribune.com/theskyline

The suburbs are boring? Wrong. Stand in downtown Naperville at the bustling corner of Washington and Chicago Avenues. You're within blocks of about 50 restaurants, every chain store you can imagine, a handsome riverwalk, the DuPage Children's Museum, one of the world's largest carillons, and a new concert hall.

The combined population of Naperville and Aurora, its even larger neighbor to the west, is a staggering 318,000 people—nearly as large as such major-league Midwestern cities as Cincinnati (330,000) and St. Louis (350,000). "Around here, 'the city' is Naperville," not Chicago, says Christine Jeffries, president of Naperville's convention and visitors bureau.

Chicago itself, with 2.8 million people, is no longer a decaying Rust Belt city, as during the 1970s, but an ascendant global city, its multicultural flavor encapsulated by the mirrored, stainless-steel wonder of Millennium Park's "Bean," designed by London's Anish Kapoor. The city's diverse economy has shielded it from the steep downturn of one-industry towns like Detroit while its history of butchering hogs, making tools and stacking wheat has helped propel it to preeminence in the futures markets and a "knowledge economy" where its specialized law and accounting firms excel.

"A knowledge economy doesn't fall from the sky," says Columbia University sociologist Saskia Sassen. "It actually has its origins in material practice. If you are a steel firm in Utah and you want to go global, you don't go to New York. You go to Chicago. They know how to do it."

But how, looking ahead, can Chicago press its advantages as a global city and create a better quality of life in the bargain?

One way, it seems, is to draw inspiration from the Burnham Plan and its emphasis on infrastructure as a multi-faceted tool for building more beautiful, humane cities. A good example is double-decked Wacker Drive. It doesn't just speed traffic around the Loop. Its walls are draped in Beaux-Arts garb straight out of Paris. And now Mayor Daley is building a riverwalk alongside it.

This sort of thinking underlies a forward-looking exhibit at the Chicago History Museum, "Burnham 2.0: A Composite Plan for the High-Speed Rail City." The show, shaped by guest curators David Goodman and Romina Canna of the Chicago Architectural Club, is based on the sound idea that a related series of small plans, rather than a single overarching vision, offers the most realistic strategy for channeling growth in this era. It suggests that Chicago should again position itself as a center of infrastructure, this time as a hub for a high-speed trains that run throughout the Midwest.

The show's green aspirations are captured by one of its most arresting images, by Chicago architects Michael Wilkinson and Richard Blender, portraying the transformation of the infamous Circle interchange west of the Loop into a vital landscape where people, not cars, would rule. A new park would be built over the highway with terrarium-like scoops admitting light to the drivers below. Rail travelers would take public transit to an office/hotel center near the University of Illinois at Chicago campus. The architects cleverly call their plan "Circle Square," evoking the urbane public squares of Europe. It's a dazzling vision of the future. Unfortunately, the park looks vast and un-enclosed, more "Blade Runner" than St. Peter's Square.

That same frustrating combination—a high-flying concept untethered from everyday reality—characterizes the show's competition-winning design for a high-speed rail hub on the block east of Union Station. The plan, by Michael Cady, Elba Gil, David Lillie and Andres Montana of the Chicago office of tvsdesign, envisions a mostly-underground station with a folded green roof that forms a kind of riverfront park. The scheme winningly makes the point that infrastructure can be more than anonymous urban machinery. Trouble is, there are two buildings on the block right now, including the 35-story 222 S. Riverside Plaza office building.

Yet, other proposals in the show are both speculative and actionable, like the landscape architect Peter Schaudt's vision for a "Mid-City Transitway" along 8.5 miles of Cicero Avenue. He calls for a new mass transit line that would link the CTA's Orange and Blue Lines, factories for green technology and new open space. It's a sustainable, 21st Century alternative to the 20th Century, car-centric vision of the late Mayor Richard J. Daley, who in the 1960s and 1970s unsuccessfully tried to ram a Crosstown Expressway down the Cicero corridor. "We looked at it as a working landscape that could give something back both in terms of sustainability and the economy," Schaudt says.

Like the Burnham Plan, the show uses architectural drawings

"Around here, 'the city' is Naperville," not Chicago. --Christine Jeffries, president of Naperville's convention and visitors bureau.

Above, an image from the "Burnham 2.0" show courtesy of the Chicago Architectural Club.

as a tool to engage viewers and get the public excited about new visions for the future. What's missing from "Burnham 2.0," though, is a new Burnham, a galvanizing figure who can serve as a nexus between the worlds of power and vision. Burnham and his allies excelled at drawing together leading architects and businessmen—the dreamers *and* doers. The only Chicago architect who comes close today is Stanley Tigerman and he's devoting extra time to a 2016 Summer Olympics in Chicago—a good cause, but one that lacks the Burnham Plan's expansive focus.

There's a hint of the old business/urban planning alliance in the work of another group, Chicago Metropolis 2020, headquartered in the Inland Steel Building at Monroe and Dearborn Streets. The Chicago non-profit was created by the same organization of business leaders, the Commercial Club of Chicago, that backed Burnham's Plan.

Adding razzle-dazzle to the Burnham Plan centennial, Chicago Metropolis 2020 in June will open temporary pavilions in Millennium Park designed by two renowned architects, London's Zaha Hadid and Amsterdam's Ben van Berkel. Yet Chicago Metropolis 2020 is also pushing for a permanent legacy, like new bike and walking paths to link to the region's existing network of trails.

"I don't see that this is justified as a celebration if it doesn't lead to results," says Metropolis 2020 President George Ranney.

The group's color-splashed, 36-page document, "The Metropolis Plan: Choices for the Chicago Region," focuses more on comprehensive, regionwide strategies than on individual projects. The only drawings in it are bland paintings that echo the upbeat, Depression-era murals you see in old post offices. It's as different from the avant-garde modernism of the "Burnham 2.0" exhibit as LaSalle Street bankers are from Wicker Park hipsters.

But the plan has a real radical streak, urging that the region adopt an entirely new set of land-use and transportation policies. It uses advanced computer modeling to reveal how much the policies it touts will change things: "The average resident of the Chicago region would spend 155 fewer hours a year in traffic—or four work weeks. . . . We would spare 300 square miles of open space from development . . . . We would save $3.7 billion in local, water, sewer and street costs.".

The most important legacy of Metropolis 2020, however, may not be its plan, but the process it has set in motion. Four years ago, Metropolis 2020 was among those pushing for the creation of a new agency called the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning—CMAP, for short. CMAP, which was created by state legislation in 2005, is responsible for land use and transportation planning in the seven-county Chicago area. It is either going to be a sleeping giant that puts real muscle behind the planning aims of Metropolis 2020 or a paper tiger whose smart-growth agenda is routinely flouted by the region's suburbs.

The obscure agency is ensconced on the eighth floor of Sears Tower and headed by Executive Director Randall S. Blankenhorn, a former Illinois Department of Transportation official. Many urban planners despise IDOT for what they regard as its tunnel-vision perspective—putting new roads through cornfields with little regard for their broader impact—but Blankenhorn is winning good reviews. "He's a complete surprise for a guy who came out of IDOT," Ranney says. "We were terrified."

CMAP's potential for clout comes from its power to rank all proposed federally funded transportation projects in the region, thus determining which are most likely to get funding and how fast. In making the rankings, the agency will take into account a wide range of land-use factors, such as provision for open space, access to public transit, affordable housing and others.

"The process is going to be turned on its head," Blankenhorn says. "Past plans have started with what transportation improvements we wanted or needed, and built a regional plan around it." Now, he adds, land-use considerations will be tied to transportation proposals. Say Metra wanted to extend a commuter line to Ottawa, more than 80 miles from the Loop. CMAP would say no. Instead, Blankenhorn says, priority should be given to projects "closer to downtown, closer to the job centers of the region."

Blankenhorn has no regulatory power. He can't tell suburbs what they can—or can't—build. He is essentially trying to find a middle way between the "anything goes" policies that enabled sprawl and a restrictive "urban growth boundary" that would reign in sprawl by limiting new development outside the boundary. "There's going to have to be suburban growth," he says. "We hope it's not as rampant as it's been in the past."

Can CMAP strike this balance? That will become clearer this year as the agency unveils its comprehensive plan for the region, called "GO TO 2040." The agency will present different scenarios of the region's growth to the public this spring and summer. By the fall of 2010, the plan will go for approval to CMAP's board, which represents Chicago, Cook County and the collar counties. During public workshops, CMAP will work with the Chicago-based Congress for the New Urbanism, a leading anti-sprawl group comprising architects, planners and other design professionals, to help ordinary citizens visualize what the future might look like. Their art of persuasion will be crucial. To succeed, Blankenhorn says, "we have to convince the residents."

It won't be easy, at least if one controversial development—Toyota Park, the 20,000-seat stadium that is home to the Chicago Fire soccer team—offers any indication. Opened in 2006 at 71st Street and Harlem Avenue in southwest suburban Bridgeview, the stadium is a poster child for short-sighted, car-oriented development. It sits amid a sea of 8,000 parking spaces. There are no bike racks or bus shelters. It's even named for a car company.

Though he doesn't question the stadium's location, Blankenhorn considers it one of the region's biggest recent regional planning mistakes. "There was no thought of how people could get to Toyota Park by public transportation," he says.

But Bridgeview Mayor Steve Landek defends the stadium, which is now served by express buses that link it to the CTA's Orange Line. Public transit amenities, including bike racks and bus shelters, will be added, he says. Most important, in his view, the stadium changes the image of his suburb from gritty warehouses to glamorous sporting events. "This is the entree for the southwest suburbs to say, 'We can do it too,' " he says.

Such disputes hint at the tensions that will course through the region as it celebrates the Burnham Plan centennial and writes a new comprehensive plan that strives to live up to the great plan's standard. Should local needs predominate or regional ones? What should the region's priorities be? Are people ready to move from green gadgetry to a green way of life.

So let the conversation over the Green Region begin. Just remember: A plan isn't a blueprint. It's a vision, an aspiration. You measure its impact over decades or a century. It's guaranteed that not all of the projects that a plan proposes actually will happen. What matters more is the direction it sets and how that direction affects our quality of life. The real power of the Burnham Plan is the power of an idea: that we are forever engaged in the process of making better cities and suburbs, and that we still have the capacity to do that—in a new century, confronting new realities and imagining a new and greener future. □

bkamin@tribune.com Tribune reporters Patrick T. Reardon and Charles Leroux contributed to this story.

Looking ahead, can Chicago press its advantages as a global city and create a better quality of life in the bargain?