



# Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning

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## MEMORANDUM

**To:** CMAP Board

**Date:** January 6, 2010

**From:** Greg Sanders

**Re:** *GO TO 2040* Policy Briefing: Data Sharing and Transparency

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From fall 2009 to spring 2010, CMAP staff will brief the Board on key policy areas that are recommended to be among the priorities of *GO TO 2040*. At the January meeting, one of the key policy issues discussed will be **data sharing and transparency**. It is expected that the *GO TO 2040* plan will recommend increased sharing of information and data between government agencies as well as with the general public.

### Summary

CMAP is committed to the principle that governments operate most effectively when they have access to complete, accurate, and timely information. Specifically:

- Every action or decision made by a government entity should be based on high-quality information so that costs, benefits and alternative courses of action can be quickly and accurately evaluated.
- The public is best served when government information is freely accessible to all.
- Public entities can coordinate policies and operations among themselves best when information is available across jurisdictions.

Recent events have forcefully brought the issues of government transparency and data sharing into public awareness. The attacks of September 11, 2001, drove home the need for better coordination (especially information sharing) across jurisdictions. Several cities and regions across the United States have adopted sweeping open data policies, bringing new efficiencies to government operations, improving public satisfaction, and raising expectations for other state and local governments to adopt similar policies. In our region, a few public agencies have responded by releasing more data and documents, but most lag behind.

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Transparency (open data, documents, and communications) and data sharing across jurisdictions and levels of government are gaining strength locally and nationally. On January 1, 2010, a revised Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) in Illinois put heightened responsibility on all public agencies to make their information available. A similar mandate is occurring at the federal level, as new guidance in a memorandum from OMB director Peter Orszag ([http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/assets/memoranda\\_fy2009/m09-21.pdf](http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/assets/memoranda_fy2009/m09-21.pdf)) requires all executive departments and agencies to begin timely publication of their data online in formats that can be retrieved, indexed, and searched by commonly used web applications. It is possible, or even likely, that federal or state requirements for data publication will begin to affect local governments in the near future. CMAP can play a role in helping the region and its local governments to “get ahead of the curve” in data sharing, so that compliance with federal or state requirements in the future is streamlined and efficient.

CMAP’s work on the Regional Indicators Project (a partnership with The Chicago Community Trust) represents important progress toward regional data sharing. Scheduled to be launched as part of *GO TO 2040* plan implementation beginning in October 2010, the project’s website will streamline acquisition and analysis of complex data from many sources. But this effort has also demonstrated the frequent difficulty of acquiring data on certain subjects and highlighted the importance of proactive data sharing by government agencies.

### **Importance of data sharing and transparency**

Transparency has long been considered essential to good governance and public accountability. The Illinois Freedom of Information Act describes transparency as follows:

Pursuant to the fundamental philosophy of the American constitutional form of government, it is declared to be the public policy of the State of Illinois that all persons are entitled to full and complete information regarding the affairs of government and the official acts and policies of those who represent them as public officials and public employees consistent with the terms of this Act. Such access is necessary to enable the people to fulfill their duties of discussing public issues fully and freely, making informed political judgments and monitoring government to ensure that it is being conducted in the public interest.

The General Assembly hereby declares that it is the public policy of the State of Illinois that access by all persons to public records promotes the transparency and accountability of public bodies at all levels of government. It is a fundamental obligation of government to operate openly and provide public records as expeditiously and efficiently as possible in compliance with this Act.

Because they are fundamentally data-driven and cross-jurisdictional, planning and policy analysis are dependent on effective sharing of information. Government, academic, and non-profit groups across our region can attest to the importance of data to their efforts. Jobs, housing, transportation, water supply, human services, and many other policy issues require

good information at a fine level of detail over a broad area and an extended time period. Data sharing is also crucial for hands-on planning activities such as disaster preparedness and congestion mitigation.

Data acquisition is sometimes straightforward, but most often it is not. Modern policy issues inherently tend to involve multiple jurisdictions because today's markets (housing, employment and so on) and natural resources (watersheds, wilderness areas) are regional or even global in nature. The more broadly a policy problem spans jurisdictions, the more difficult—and crucial—data sharing becomes. Central data resources managed by a single jurisdiction (such as state sales tax or federal transportation funding data) may be acquired more easily, as long as the relevant agency is willing to provide access. To complicate matters, data acquisition must be iterative to be effective; frequent updates are vital to our ability to track changes over time and predict the effects of various policies.

Current practice is to grant data access on a case-by-case basis, which causes inefficiencies. Efforts are duplicated because every agency requesting data must spend valuable hours processing the same data set. Gaps arise because regular updates are not available on a consistent schedule. Inaccuracies often result from faulty processing by agencies that lack the needed data expertise.

Fortunately, technological advances today enable on-demand updates of data—not only so that data seekers can download the most current data at any time, but so that application servers can pull data whenever it is needed, in an automated process without human intervention. Data that is continuously available to these servers is called “machine-readable” and has become the standard for federal data resources such as <http://data.gov> and what are trying to achieve with the Regional Indicators project.

### **Recommended direction for GO TO 2040**

To improve government efficiency and accountability, *GO TO 2040* should support the sharing of data across jurisdictions and the transparency of information for the general public. A significant step toward data sharing and transparency is the **Regional Indicators Project**, which will measure the region's progress by tracking key indicators identified through the planning process. This project will require continual acquisition and updating of the indicators, relying on access to data sources from a variety of public agencies. In addition to the indicators project, CMAP intends to serve as a **data resource** for the region, facilitating government agencies' and non-governmental groups' access to local and regional data.

Beyond CMAP's involvement in the indicators project and as a data resource, *GO TO 2040* should **support transparency as a principle** and encourage government agencies of all types to make data that they collect broadly available. There is a role for CMAP to provide **technical assistance to government agencies** that may not have the capacity to easily share their data; CMAP can develop methods, formats, or processes to make this a routine and simple activity.

CMAP can and should play a leadership role in regional efforts to streamline information flows from government to public and from government to government. CMAP's role as convener, information resource and technical assistance provider could help to increase the flow of high-quality information within our region in meaningful ways. Examples of CMAP involvement might include:

- Creation of web portals where public information could be retrieved in searchable, machine-readable formats (such web portals could divert a significant number of requests normally handled by for county and municipal governments).
- Creation of templates and sample code to simplify the export of data from local governments.
- Convening regular meetings and webinars to solve common problems associated with addressing the demand for government data.

#### **Potential *GO TO 2040* recommendations**

CMAP and the State of Illinois should define data transparency practices consistent with the latest federal guidance. Increasingly, federal data reporting requirements are likely to follow and exceed the standards set by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), as indicated in the recent memorandum by OMB director Orszag. Our region's units of government should implement similar standards in all their operations -- not only to be consistent with federal guidance, but because transparency is crucial for good government in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

CMAP should maintain websites for government data in Illinois similar to the federal government's <http://data.gov> resource. This regional data resource should provide comprehensive user-friendly access to local and regional government data. This resource should be searchable and include geospatial data and machine-readable formats.

CMAP should convene stakeholder discussions about how public data should be formatted and made accessible. Simple, standardized data aggregation and update routines will become increasingly important as expectations for government transparency grow. CMAP should research proven models of regional data sharing (such as the District of Columbia's CapStat system) and recommend best practices that can guide local governments.

CMAP should integrate local and regional data with available state and federal data resources, so that constituents and local governments have access to a seamless informational product that encompasses all available information.

Government entities at all levels, including county and municipal, should make freely available all relevant data in their possession by routine posting to the Internet. Relevant data includes:

- Building permits
- Business licenses

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- Zoning codes and variances
- Code violations
- Public investments in infrastructure, public works, assistance programs, etc.
- Requests for city/county services (such as 311 calls)
- Other administrative and operational data

Data should be posted at the most granular level possible (e.g., building permits listed by property, not aggregated to a whole community.) Personally identifiable information about private citizens should generally be suppressed, but the data itself should still be made available, after removal of such personal information. For example, building permits can be listed by property address without the filer's name (when the filer is a private citizen).

CMAP should provide technical assistance to municipalities seeking to make local data available on the Internet. Such technical assistance should be underwritten by public funds and updated annually to ensure that the region implements new technologies as they become available. Large jurisdictions (those with more than 50,000 constituents) should routinely post their data on the Internet in machine-readable formats such as XML, RSS, or JSON. This would allow the data to be compiled into databases similar to the federal government's <http://data.gov> website.

**ACTION REQUESTED: Discussion.**

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