



## MEMORANDUM

**To:** CMAP Board

**Date:** November 10, 2009

**From:** Jesse Elam, Senior Planner

**Re:** *GO TO 2040* Policy Briefing: Open Space and Parks

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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 November meeting, one of the key policy issues discussed will be **open space and parks**. It is expected that the *GO TO 2040* plan will recommend protection of additional open space and improved access to parks.

### *Summary*

The region's network of parks and natural areas is one of its superlative assets, promoting public health, protecting environmental quality, and making up part of regional identity. A network of parks connected by open space corridors was a central recommendation of the Burnham Plan, meant at that time to bring refreshment to a newly urban citizenry. This is just as important a century later and remains an unfinished project, as recreational open space is below the population need in many places in the region and areas with important conservation values remain unprotected.

The network of parks and natural areas, from the neighborhood to the regional scale, provides many benefits to northeastern Illinois. Recognizing this, it is often called "green infrastructure" because of its similarity to the other infrastructure networks that undergird prosperity in the region. Like other forms of infrastructure, it also needs to be managed, restored, and expanded; doing so is a top priority of *GO TO 2040*. But it is important to perceive the deeper significance of open space protection: It is a legacy from this generation to those following it, a legacy of guaranteed beneficence.

### *Importance of open space and parks*

Open space preservation is now seen to have an even broader value unknown in Burnham's time. Providing nearby opportunities for outdoor recreation is considered important for reducing obesity and guarding against what is figuratively called "nature deficit disorder." It is also known to have positive spillover effects, like increases in property values nearby. In another example, protecting "hubs" of open space connected by corridors ensures that there are large blocks of habitat between which species can migrate with relative ease. This is important

because habitat fragmentation is one of the biggest threats to biodiversity in the region. Protecting open space can also play a role in stormwater management and flood reduction.

Well over 200,000 acres of parks and preserves are held by public agencies in the region, with additional lands held privately but protected under conservation easements. The county forest preserve and conservation districts hold the lion's share of the public land, about four-fifths. The federal government owns nearly 20,000 acres at the Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie. Various state lands — both nature preserves and recreation areas — and park district holdings make up the remainder.

Public support for additional open space protection in the region is strong, as evidenced by the ability of the county forest preserve and conservation districts to raise about \$1 billion for land acquisition since 1997 through referenda and bond issuance. Research also indicates that people prefer to live near parks and open space if the opportunity is available, which translates into property value increases near protected lands. Additionally, preservation of open space was identified as one of the region's most important issues throughout the public engagement activities of *GO TO 2040*.

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

Open space can be distinguished conceptually as oriented toward conservation ("preserves") or toward local access and recreation ("parks"), although the distinction is by no means cut and dried. For instance, a number of park districts, which have traditionally focused on recreation, hold natural areas and have conservation programming.

Focusing on providing parks would tend to result in more open space in more developed and centrally located places, whereas focusing on conservation would result in the protection of open space in less populated, more peripheral areas of the region. In practice, both needs should be accommodated. The highest priority areas for providing local parks are those where there is **least access to parks** currently. The highest priority areas for establishing new preserves are those places with the **most important natural areas**. Finally, a third priority is **establishing connections** between these preserves and parks to protect and allow access to the full network of green infrastructure in the region. Included in these potential connections are a number of open space and greenway projects that have special significance, the Green Legacy projects identified as part of the Burnham Plan Centennial celebration. The recommended direction of *GO TO 2040* is to focus regional open space protection efforts on these three priorities, setting aggressive targets for each.

#### *Potential recommendations*

The approach to natural area protection was established through engagement with stakeholders in the conservation community. These stakeholders indicated that the Chicago Wilderness *Green Infrastructure Vision* (GIV), which recommends significant additional protection of land in the region, should be the primary conservation basis of *GO TO 2040*, and should be used to help prioritize land protection and restoration activity by the state and by local units of government as well as by private interests. Aggressive targets for land protection should be set in

partnership with the conservation community. Forest preserve and conservation district personnel were instrumental in the development of the GIV. With their expertise, the portfolio of properties they maintain, professional staff, and their continued success with open space referenda, they are the chief implementers of the acquisition element of the GIV. Appropriate state open space programs should also take into account whether an acquisition opportunity is within the GIV through revisions to their evaluation criteria. While conservation open space will be protected and held by many different entities working with many funding sources, *GO TO 2040* will encourage the use of consistent criteria among them for prioritizing land protection and restoration. Finally, further refinement of the GIV is needed to prioritize actions for its implementation.

To evaluate the need for local access to parks, staff tested existing park acreage and locations against national standards for park accessibility, and found that many places in the region need more parkland, with more than 40% of the region's residents currently living in places without adequate nearby access to parks or open space. It may not be possible to fully eliminate this problem even by 2040, but the results of the analysis suggested that a concerted program to build more parks in underserved areas could bring adequate open space access to the majority of these areas. This could be accomplished through a combination of new park construction in already developed areas, sharing park facilities between school and park districts or other institutions, and requiring or providing for open space during redevelopment. Even small-scale "urban greening" improvements such as planting trees, installing planters, and making use of rain gardens and green roofs can be incorporated locally during redevelopment and during regular infrastructure rehabilitation. As with conservation open space, *GO TO 2040* will encourage the use of consistent standards for accessibility to ensure that parks are expanded in the places that need them the most.

Although aggressive targets are needed to expand parks and protect additional conservation areas, *GO TO 2040* will generally take a conservative approach to recommending additional funding for plan recommendations in recognition of the difficult fiscal situation faced by many levels of government. A balance must be struck between current and future needs. It may be possible that using existing funding programs more flexibly or encouraging collaboration between implementers could help stretch funding for open space protection further. Nevertheless, it is clear that increased state and federal funding is needed to achieve the level of park provision and land conservation envisioned in the plan. Both have declined significantly in recent years. Some of the biggest open space hubs in the region are based on land protected by the federal government, and direct federal investment in open space in the region should be supported. This could happen through the formation of national wildlife refuges and the transfer of appropriate surplus federal property for open space uses, as happened at Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie and Fort Sheridan. Private sector efforts to protect open space through land trusts have become a significant part of conservation activity, both nationally and in northeastern Illinois. It is recommended that privately funded open space activities also consider the priorities of *GO TO 2040* to most effectively leverage their investments.

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The development process itself can be leveraged for conservation if part of the site is permanently set aside in a conservation easement while correspondingly reducing lot size in the part of the site to be developed. This should be designed in such a way as to minimize impacts to the environment and to set aside part of the site for conservation purposes. This technique can be used during both greenfield development or reinvestment projects. Because of the goal of having a network of open space, local governments permitting these developments should establish policies to ensure these protected common areas link through trails and greenways to other protected lands and accessible to the general public.

**ACTION REQUESTED: Discussion.**

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