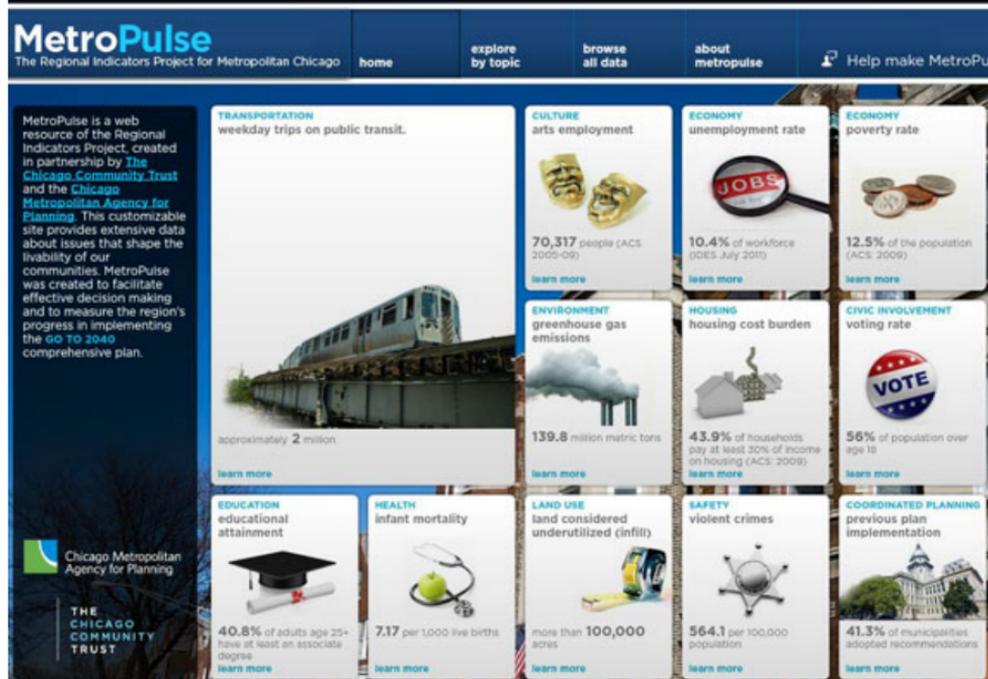




## A New Focus on Sustainable Regions



By Carissa Schively Slotterback, AICP

There is currently tremendous interest and momentum around sustainability planning at a regional scale in the U.S.

Central to these planning efforts has been the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's **Sustainable Communities Regional Planning Grants**, which have to date funded sustainability planning in **74 regions** across the country.

But even before these federal grants a number of regional bodies began sustainability planning efforts. Driven by a variety of issues and stakeholder interest, they created regional sustainability plans that serve as models for communities and regions now engaged in their own efforts.

These regional planning efforts were recently documented in a study that I completed at the University of Minnesota, with funding from the **Center for Transportation Studies**.

Five U.S. cases were identified:

- Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (Illinois): **GO TO 2040**
- Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission (Pennsylvania, New Jersey): **Connections: The Regional Plan for a Sustainable Future**
- Denver Regional Council of Governments (Colorado): **Metro Vision 2035**
- Long Island Regional Planning Council (New York): **Sustainable Strategies for Long Island 2035**
- St. Cloud Joint Planning District (Minnesota): **Sustainability Framework Plan**

The cases were evaluated through a review of planning documents and interviews with a variety of participants and stakeholders, including regional planning agency staff, elected officials, consultants, advocates, and local and state agency staff. The cases included in the study included only those plans that have an explicitly stated focus on sustainability.

The *Framework for Regional Sustainability Planning and Implementation* summary report, expected soon, highlights the research findings, documenting plan content, planning processes, and plan implementation. A series of best practices is also provided. Examples include:

- Plan Content Best Practice: Define Sustainability relative to the Regional Context.** The five plans vary greatly in terms of the issues that they elevate in their plans. For example, the Long Island Regional Planning Council saw overcoming challenges related to intergovernmental coordination and funding for public services and facilities as central to achieving sustainability, thus elevating Taxes and Governance as a key sustainability plan topic.
- Planning Process Best Practice: Engage Issue-specific Workgroups to Build Interest and Convene Expertise.** Acknowledging that it can be difficult to get people interested in long-range, regional-scale planning, efforts to connect with participants via their personal interests can be effective in bring more people to the planning process. For example, the Sustainability Committee of the St. Cloud Joint Planning District organized interest groups around 17 sustainability best practice areas (e.g., waste reduction, surface and groundwater resources, sustainable food systems) to convene expertise, develop plan content, and lead future implementation efforts.
- Plan Implementation Best Practice: Track Indicators that Relate to the Regional Plan.** The implementation content in the five plans varies greatly, with one of regional jurisdictions developing a complementary set of indicators organized around the key topic areas addressed in the plan. The Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning is using its **MetroPulse online tool** to provide data on a wide range of issues, with interactive features that allow users to view data at multiple geographic and temporal scales.