

Economic Stress Index |

Sustainability summit sends message about cooperation

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Editor's note: Randall Blankenhorn was misidentified in an earlier version of this story.

ROCKFORD—The message at the Regional Sustainable Communities Summit sounded good to Dyanna Chandler.

Now she'll have to wait three years to see whether the latest effort at reinventing how the region's people work, live and play gets past the planning stage.

"Is this just another plan that will go into a filing cabinet?" Chandler pondered after four hours of presentations today at Northern Illinois University-Rockford on how Boone and Winnebago counties will put a \$600,000 federal grant toward restoring the region's long-lost economic mojo.

"It's easy to be cynical when you think back at all of the planning processes this community has been involved in that were not carried out," Mayor Larry Morrissey told the 136 summiteers.

From a planning perspective, sustainability means taking a balanced approach when dealing with social, economic and environmental issues.

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"To be sustainable, a community cannot overemphasize any one of these areas at the expense of the others," said Genevieve Borich, executive director of the Rockford Region Economic Development District.

Morrissey, Belvidere Mayor Fred Brereton, Boone and Winnebago leaders, and more than two dozen other municipalities and organizations are behind the latest push to produce a 20-year plan for the region. And there's added incentive to make it work: money.

The Rockford region is one of 45 to get grants to build a new framework to carry out federally funded sustainable-communities projects.

With the planning grant, leaders will gather information in three broad areas: quality of life, economic strategies and environmental systems. They'll compile data on land, water, education, existing infrastructure, housing, technology, energy, economic development and other areas.

The resulting Vital Signs database will be a tool to help identify the projects that can improve the region's economy and produce jobs in the most sustainable way.

The planning process, if approved by the Department of Housing and Urban Development, could result in millions of new dollars flowing into the two-county region, Boone County Board Chairman Bob Walberg said.

The lead agency is HUD, which has partnered with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and U.S. Department of Transportation for the program. It's recognition that while a grant may be for a new highway, it may have a profound effect on housing, the environment or other factors.

What local officials like about the Sustainable Communities grants is that they give local governments latitude to use money to solve problems they've identified.

Federal grants are awarded to communities that chase problems fitting federal guidelines, but those problems might not be

the most compelling ones facing a community.

“Give us the money at the local level, give us the money at the regional level,” said Randall Blankenhorn, executive director of the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning. “Let us solve our problems.”

Liz Kulevich of Oregon is glad to see officials taking a long-term view of the future.

“It’s good to know that people are trying,” she said after the summit.

Rockford businessman Russ Johansson said the summit is a call to action for people from all walks of life to get involved.

“The leaders on both the civic side and the private sector have to step up to see that this goes,” he said.

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