

Road map for region's future

Better transit, tax policies pushed by agency

BY MIKE NOLAN

Southtown Star 3/15/11
 mnolan@southtownstar.com
 Modernizing the Chicago region's transportation infrastructure and reforming tax policies are among the keys to boosting the metro area's competitiveness, Southland business leaders were told Monday.

But realizing those lofty goals will largely be the job of the region's business community, according to representatives of the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning who spoke before the Chicago Southland Chamber of Commerce.

The agency suggests in its "Go to 2040" plan that multibillion-dollar investments are needed to improve roads as well as passenger and freight rail lines, and a more equitable tax system is essential to making Illinois and the Chicago area more hospitable to businesses.

The road map to "sustainable prosperity," as the plan describes it, was released last fall, and its members touched on highlights of the study at the chamber's meeting in Tinley Park.

Transportation investments will have to consider an expected doubling in the volume of truck traffic in the Chicago region in coming decades, and a need to improve the flow of freight rail traffic through the area, said Randy Blankenhorn, the agency's executive director and a former urban planning expert with the Illinois Department of Transportation.

He said more federal dollars will be required to fund a project that Illinois and freight railroads have committed to in order to break up



Southland strategy: Randy Blankenhorn (left), executive director of the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, Richton Park Mayor Rick Reinbold (center) and Will County Executive Larry Walsh (right) participate in a panel discussion Monday during the Southland Chamber Regional Consensus Lunch at the Tinley Park Convention Center. | MATTHEW GROTTO-SUN-TIMES MEDIA

freight-train logjams.
 "We need a national vision and national investment strategy for freight," he said.

The Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning supports changing how property and sales taxes are levied to make the tax system "more predictable, transparent and fair," according to the "Go to 2040" plan. Residents and businesses in the Chicago area are hamstrung by a "1960s tax policy," Blankenhorn said.

"We're not talking about raising or lowering taxes, that's not what this is about," he said.

The planning agency, however, does favor extending the sales tax to cover services, which it says could

WANT TO KNOW MORE?
 To find out more about the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning's "Go to 2040" study, visit www.cmap.illinois.gov/2040

result in lower sales tax rates on goods. It also recommends increasing the state's gasoline tax by 8 cents per gallon to better fund road maintenance budgets.

Created a little more than five years ago by the state Legislature, the Chicago Metropolitan Agency

for Planning's members include elected, business and civic leaders. Palos Hills Mayor Gerald Bennett is its board chairman, and Richton Park Mayor Rick Reinbold is on the board of directors.

Reinbold, who was at Monday's chamber meeting, said "Go to 2040" isn't a directive but a "guideline" for the region's future growth.

To keep it from gathering dust on some shelf, however, business leaders, such as the chamber, need to press policymakers on implementing its recommendations, Blankenhorn said.

"The business community needs to support (the plan) to make it happen," he said.

BRIEFLY

Southdowns Staff 3/19/11

Tollway, visitors bureau team up on info signs

The Illinois Tollway is installing new information signs on Interstate 294, featuring symbols directing travelers to nearby restaurants, gas stations and hotels. The tollway said the signs were developed in coordination with the Chicago Southland Convention & Visitors Bureau, with input from state representatives Bob Rita (D-Blue Island) and Will Davis (D-Homewood).

The first sign was installed recently along the southbound lanes of I-294, near the interchange with Illinois 394. A second sign will be installed along the northbound lanes sometime this spring, the tollway said. The cost to make and install both signs will be \$40,000.

State Senate president proposes adding \$1 to state cigarette tax

Cullerton wants funds to help pay for construction

CH62 Sun Times 3/15/11
BY DAVE MCKINNEY

Sun-Times Springfield bureau chief
dmckinney@suntimes.com

SPRINGFIELD — Senate President John Cullerton wants to dig deeper into the pockets of cigarette smok-

ers to help float a \$31 billion state construction program whose main funding sources have been imperiled by a legal challenge.

Cullerton plans today to call for a \$1 per pack increase in the state cigarette tax to make up for lost revenues from video poker and higher liquor taxes that were stricken by a state appeals court.

The Chicago Democrat will lay out his plan during a

speech before the Illinois Asphalt Pavement Association, and aides predicted a package could emerge from the Senate by week's end.

"The construction program is too important to risk delays," Cullerton spokesman John Patterson said late Monday.

The state's 98-cent-a-pack cigarette tax has been in place since 2002, and Illinois rests in the middle of the pack nationally among states with cigarette taxes. New York has the highest state cigarette tax in the country at \$4.35 a pack.

A cigarette tax increase in Illinois is no sure legislative bet, however. Attempts to raise the cigarette tax by \$1.01 a pack in January stalled in the House by a 51-66 vote. Sixty votes were needed for passage.

A lawsuit filed by Chicago Blackhawks owner Rocky Wirtz and his family's liquor distributorship, Wirtz Beverage Illinois LLC, was upheld in February after the Illinois Appellate Court ruled the revenue package supporting the construction program was unconstitutional.

The case is pending before the Illinois Supreme Court, but state lawmakers must cobble a funding stream for the statewide bricks-and-mortar program soon, or the state risks losing a construction season.