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Planning agency see Route 53 extension as a top priority over the next decades

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By **JOHN ROSZKOWSKI** jroszkowski@pioneerlocal.com

A Chicago area regional planning agency lists the proposed northern extension of Route 53 into Lake County as one of the region's top transportation priorities over the next 30 years.

The GO TO 2040 Comprehensive Regional Plan, released by the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, also calls for an 8-cent increase in the state's gasoline tax to provide more funding for road and transit projects long-term.

Randy Blankenhorn, executive director of the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, unveiled a draft version of the agency's plan during the annual meeting of the Transportation Management Association of Lake Cook June 3 in Deerfield. The plan addresses a wide range of planning issues facing Chicagoland region over the next 30 years, including transportation and infrastructure, the environment, housing, education and quality of life issues.

Regarding transportation, the plan lists the Central Lake County Corridor, which includes the Route 53 extension and a proposed Route 120 bypass, as one of new five capital projects identified priorities for the region. Other new projects making the list include extension of the Elgin O'Hare Expressway and Western O'Hare Bypass, the south extension of the CTA red line, an interchange connecting I-294 with I-57, and a proposed West Loop Transportation Center to serve as a hub for Metra, CTA and high-speed rail, Blankenhorn said.

Lake County Board Chairman Suzi Schmidt and Buffalo Grove Mayor Elliott Hartstein, who also spoke at the TMA meeting, were both pleased to see Route 53 making the list as a top priority project in the plan.

"I can't tell you how good it feels it's at the top of the list and it's in Lake County," said Schmidt, who has been pushing for state support for both the Route 53 extension and a proposed four-lane Route 120 bypass, which would connect with the Route 53 extension south of Grayslake.

'A consensus'

Schmidt said 76 percent of Lake County voters supported an advisory referendum in favor of the Route 53 extension. "I call that a consensus," she said.

Hartstein, who has long been a supporter of the Route 53 project, also praised the CMAP report and urged the creation of a corridor planning council to begin the study process for the Route 53 extension.

"There's a lot of people that would like to see it happen," he said.

While there has been some opposition to the Route 53 project over the years, Blankenhorn said he believes the roadway could be designed that is sensitive to the environment and communities along the route. He said a six-lane highway that carries traffic at high speeds may not be the best option.

"We're looking at something that looks different from the highways of the past," he said.



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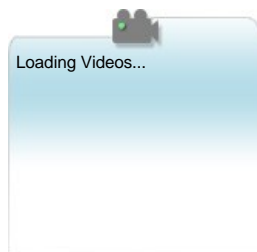
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The plan also calls for transit upgrades including improvements to Metra's Union Pacific Northwest line and Union Pacific West line.

\$385 billion

Overall, Blankenhorn said the region is projecting to spend about \$385 billion on roads and transit over the next 30 years. But, he said, the agency believes an additional \$42 billion will be needed to upgrade and modernize the system.

"We need to have a first-class transportation system, not a Third-World transportation system," he said.

The CMAP plan calls for an 8-cent increase in the state's gasoline tax as a potential way to raise additional revenue for roads and transit. Blankenhorn said the state's gas tax is currently 19 cents and has not been increased since 1989. If indexed for inflation over that 21 year period, he said the gas tax would now stand at about 34 cents.

The plan also addresses a wide range of other issues facing the region over the next 30 years, including quality of life issues, economic development, housing and land use, education and job training and water usage.

Blankenhorn said the plan also looks at potential changes to the tax system to improve equity and fairness for taxpayers. Currently, he said municipalities tend to rely heavily on sales tax revenues, while schools by and large are dependent on property taxes.

The plan also addresses the large number of units of local government in the region and duplication of services. "We're not talking about getting rid or abolishing these units of government but rather how can we consolidate services," he said.

CMAP will be hosting a series of 10 public meetings on the draft plan this summer throughout the seven-county region it serves, including Lake, Cook, DuPage, Will, Kane, Kendall and McHenry counties.

In Lake County, a public meeting will be held on June 22, from 6 to 8 p.m., at the Lake County Central Permit Facility, 500 W. Winchester Road, in Libertyville. For residents of northwest and north central Cook County, a meeting will also be held on July 29, from 6 to 8 p.m., at the Arlington Heights Public Library, 500 N. Dunton Ave., Arlington Heights. For a complete listing of meetings, visit the agency's Web site at www.goto2040.org. The draft plan will be available on line for viewing and public comment from June 11 through Aug. 6.

Blankenhorn said the agency is expect to release a final version of the plan in October.

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