

Chicago Draws Up Plan to Prosper in 2040

By TOM HUNDLEY
Published: July 16, 2010

As the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning sees it, Chicago in 2040 will no longer be battling its suburban neighbors for growth and prosperity opportunities.

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The Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning is issuing a plan for the Chicago of 2040. Among its concerns is freeway traffic.

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Another concern is a new transportation hub incorporating Union Station.

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Instead, the city will be part of a super-region competing with areas like China and Brazil. Two million more people will probably be crammed into the area, and Chicago may be served by a new, huge transportation hub in the West Loop with high-speed trains and other new transportation ideas.

If all goes according to the agency's "Go to 2040" plan, the Chicago area 30 years from now will have a different look and feel. But much of the plan's momentum and vision might seem familiar, thanks in large part to Daniel Burnham, Chicago's original über-planner.

His influence is on display, both in the strategy the planning agency has put together for the city's future, and literally — in the shrine-like glass display case in its office reception area, which holds a well-thumbed and slightly faded copy of Mr. Burnham's 101-year-old "Plan of Chicago."

"When you think about planning in the city of Chicago, you can't ignore Daniel Burnham's shadow," said Randall S. Blankenhorn, the planning agency's executive director.

Mr. Burnham was the architect who designed some of Chicago's earliest skyscrapers and oversaw construction of the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition. But his greatest contribution to Chicago may have been the 1909 plan that gave the city its broad boulevards, its miles of lakeshore park and an enduring sense that Chicago is still destined for great things.

"The main legacy of the Burnham plan is that it got people to believe in the idea of planning itself," said Carl Smith, an urban history scholar at [Northwestern University](#). "It convinced them that you can intervene in history and remake a city."

The planning agency is inviting public comments on the 404-page draft through Aug. 6, and the formal start is scheduled for October.

["Go to 2040"](#) and the Burnham plan share a pedigree:

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Today's Chicago reflects a 1909 plan by Daniel Burnham.

Both were created at the behest of the [Commercial Club of Chicago](#), an invitation-only conclave of the city's business leaders.

In 1996 the club set up a group called Chicago Metropolis 2020, which in 1999 published a plan so elegant that it was sold as a coffee-table book. One recommendation was the establishment of a regional planning agency, and acting on that suggestion, the Illinois legislature created the Chicago

Metropolitan Agency for Planning.

The agency's 2040 draft envisions Chicago as the hub of an integrated region that, in order to prosper, will need to add two million people and one million jobs over the next 30 years.

That is the view of many experts who foresee a 21st-century global economy that revolves around a dozen or so megaregions spread across Asia, Europe and the Americas. Mr. Blankenhorn said his job was to make sure the Chicago area was one of those regions.

"It's no longer Chicago against Joliet and Waukegan and Elgin," he said. "It's us against India and China and Brazil."

Architects of the 2040 plan also share Mr. Burnham's belief that Chicago's principal purpose is to serve as a transportation hub.

One of the plan's key proposals incorporates Union Station into a new West Loop Transportation Center, an underground complex that would run beneath Clinton Street between Lake Street and the Eisenhower Expressway. The center would serve as a hub for commuter trains, the EL, bus lines and a long-dreamed-of intercity [high-speed rail](#) network.

The plan also emphasizes that the movement of freight is what links Chicago to the global economy. But with government studies indicating that the already huge volume of freight handled by Chicago is likely to increase by 60 percent to 70 percent over the next 30 years, the 2040 plan focuses on modest transportation upgrades that aim simply to keep congestion at today's barely tolerable levels.

"It's unrealistic to think that congestion will go away," said Mr. Blankenhorn, the former bureau chief of urban project planning at the Illinois Department of Transportation.

In recent decades, regional planning has been driven — often to its detriment — by federally financed transportation projects.

"It became a competition for transportation dollars," said Thomas Cuculich, director of planning and development for DuPage County. "Whoever hired the best lobbyists got their project."

Mr. Cuculich, who has been involved in the planning agency's 2040 project from the start, said the new plan tried to reverse this logic. Instead of allowing the eagerness for federally financed transportation projects to shape planning priorities, the emphasis is placed on land-use considerations, conservation, green technology and job growth.

"It's a paradigm shift that needed to occur," he said.

Although the planning agency does not have authority over zoning and land use — that remains in the hands of local municipalities — it is not without influence. It has statutory power to decide which federally financed transportation projects get built.

But Mr. Blankenhorn said the key to carrying out the 2040 plan lay not in the disbursement of federal dollars, but in winning over the public.

The Chicago Plan Commission recognized the importance of that a century ago when it hired an indefatigable salesman named Walter Moody to promote the Burnham plan. Mr. Moody went on the lecture circuit with lantern slides — the PowerPoint of its day. He papered the city with pamphlets, produced a newsreel that was shown in local theaters and even managed to have the plan incorporated in the civics curriculum of public schools.

But Mr. Burnham's ideas were realized mainly because they had the financial and political backing of the Commercial Club. These days, the club no longer has that kind of clout.

“That’s not necessarily a bad thing,” Mr. Smith said. “Our society is more open, more democratic, which is good.”

In terms of democracy, the Chicago area may get bogged down by too much of a good thing. In addition to 284 municipalities, the region encompasses more than 1,400 units of local government, the most of any region in the United States. The New York metropolitan area, by contrast, has fewer than 200.

The tension between city and suburb is often the biggest obstacle that regional planners must overcome. But even as Chicago’s suburbs emerge as economic powerhouses in their own right, groups like the [Metropolitan Mayors Caucus](#), founded by Mayor [Richard M. Daley](#) in 1997, have helped foster a spirit of cooperation, city and suburban officials say.

The 2040 plan also revives what might be called the hidden legacy of the Burnham plan. Mr. Burnham cared deeply about living conditions for ordinary citizens, and in his original, 300-page handwritten manuscript he argued for providing day care to the children of the working class and making sure the police acted in a transparent manner. He also wanted the city to be equipped with plenty of public restrooms maintained to a standard of “perfect sweetness.”

These recommendations were trimmed from the plan’s final version, but according to Mr. Smith, it is clear that Mr. Burnham wanted a city that was not only grand, but also livable.

The new plan makes no mention of restrooms, but it contains chapters devoted to education, nutrition, access to health care, energy conservation and other quality-of-life issues. “Livability” appears to be a main goal.

As the planning agency’s staff members ponder the strategies for selling the 2040 plan to the public, they need look no further than the words on the jersey of the group’s softball team: “What Would Daniel Burnham Do?”

A version of this article appeared in print on July 18, 2010, on page A23A of the National edition.

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