

[Home](#) > [This Week's Crain's](#) > [Focus](#) >

[Print](#) | [Reprints](#)
[0 comments](#) | [Related Stories](#)
 [ShareThis](#)

From this week's Focus

Randy Blankenhorn, CMAP director, takes the long view of Chicago's business challenges

By: Meg McSherry Breslin October 11, 2010



Randy Blankenhorn

Randy Blankenhorn is executive director of the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, which provided a wealth of data on regional small-business formation and other trends for Crain's "State of Small Business" report. The data is part of a comprehensive plan CMAP is assembling to guide the area's future for roads, transit, open spaces and housing. Crain's talked with Mr. Blankenhorn about some of the findings regarding small-business development in the area, as well as CMAP's comprehensive plan, which its board intends to adopt Wednesday.

CRAIN'S: Were there any surprises in the data you collected regarding small businesses?

MR. BLANKENHORN: I think it's what we expected to find. It's just the sheer number of locations that are small businesses that stands out. Obviously, they are an incredibly important driver of the economy in Northeastern Illinois. We've got to think about the impact of the decisions we make when it comes to them.

What were the most encouraging findings?

The biggest one is that the role of small business hasn't decreased. You worry in an economy like this about small business's ability to survive the markets. Obviously, we've lost some businesses, but we've also gained some businesses.

Based on this data, what is the region doing right to foster small-business development?

What Illinois is doing right is trying to figure out what the role is of all the players. There's a real interest in how to encourage and how to promote small business, or at least acknowledge that it is important. For the most part, government is starting to learn where to stay out of the way.

By contrast, what is the region not doing so well?

We're not investing enough money in research. When we talk about innovation and research, there has to be investment in it. Some of that should come from the private sector. There's also a government role in terms of investing in innovation, but we need to invest in our human capital, too. We have to do a better job of educating our children and preparing them to be tomorrow's workers. We also have to do a better job in workforce training.

Is this why your organization is focusing so much on preparing a long-term strategic plan for the region?

The concerns and problems we have today are primarily the result of decisions we made 20 or 30 years ago. It's important to think about things in the context of in 2040. What kind of a region do you want for your children and grandchildren?

What else does the business community need to do to prepare for the future?

The main thing we want to see out of the business community is civic involvement. The Chicago business community is known for its civic involvement, but a lot of leaders in that area are nearing retirement age. Where is the next generation of business leaders who are civically minded? On the innovation side, it's about connections. It's as simple as bringing people together who have like minds. Where are the innovation hotbeds and what can we learn from them? Also, we've been talking about changing the education system for 30 years. If it's ever going to get done, the business community has to say it's time.

What are some of the other important things that need to be done for small businesses in particular?

Just looking at where small business has the most impact, in areas such as health services, we see an incredible opportunity in the health industry in Northeastern Illinois. A lot of things are already happening, but we don't have the right people to train nurses, much less the number of needed nurses being trained. How do we get ready for that next wave? In many different business sectors, we need to be drilling down and working with each cluster in that way.

What kind of feedback are small-business leaders already giving you about the biggest issues they face?

We hear as much about transportation issues as anything. The other thing is the workforce and can they recruit the kind of worker they need.

What about transportation concerns? How is gridlock and lack of access to quality transportation affecting small business?

Our goal for transportation is relatively straightforward. We need to maintain and modernize our existing system. We believe for the most part the basic transportation infrastructure is in place and that we need to bring it into the 21st century. Previous plans have talked about major projects, but we haven't built any of them. So we need to look at how do we move people more efficiently with the existing system and how do we make transit a first choice and not last option for people? The bottom line is we don't see loads of money falling down on us from Springfield.

© 2010 by Crain Communications Inc.

What do you think?

You must be logged in to leave a comment. [Login](#) | [Register](#)

Advertisement