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Regional planners unveil vision for Chicago area in 2040



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Regional planners on Wednesday unveiled their vision for the Chicago area's future, calling for a new emphasis on fixing existing roads, raising the state gas tax to fund road maintenance and transit, and increasing the Chicago region's share of the state's road funding pie.

Called [Go to 2040](#) and based on almost three years of research and public hearings, the plan was released by the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, a little-known agency that is responsible for land-use and transportation planning in the seven-county Chicago area.

"Our goal today is to motivate you to act. Today must be a beginning and not an end," the agency's executive director, Randy Blankenhorn, told several several hundred guests, including Chicago Mayor Richard Daley and Senator Dick Durbin, gathered in a tent in Chicago's Millennium Park.

Go to 2040 deliberately echoes Daniel Burnham and Edward Bennett's Plan of Chicago, a celebrated document published in 1909 that helped give Chicago its nearly-continuous chain of lakefront parks and such major pieces of civic infrastructure as double-decked Wacker Drive.

But the new plan is also shaped by an era of dwindling resources and, perhaps, lowered expectations about what planning can achieve.

In 2040, the plan predicts, the Chicago region will have 11 million residents, 2.4 million more than today. Yet even if its recommendations are followed, the plan says, congestion won't get better—it simply "will not increase from today's levels," which are among the nation's worst.

The plan calls for raising the state's existing 19 cents per gallon gas tax by eight cents in the short term, with annual increases that would keep pace with the rate of inflation.

And in a shot at Downstate interests, the plan asserts: "Despite having 66% of the state's population, our region receives only 45% of the state's road funding. This so-called '55/45 Split' needs to be addressed."

The plan calls for new patterns of growth that emphasize compact, walkable communities rather than auto-dependent sprawl. "During decades of rapid but largely uncoordinated expansion, the region grew in patterns that were not sustainable," it asserts.

And the plan advocates reforming state and local tax policy, as well as improving education—a theme Daley hammered at when he spoke in a panel session during the event.

"People fled cities because of schools," Daley said. "They went [to the suburbs] for one reason—better schools."

For years, regional planners have advocated many of these goals—and they have had little impact as new homes and jobs sprawled farther and farther outward from downtown Chicago.

But CMAP, which the state legislature established in 2005, hopes to ditch the image of the powerless regional planner.

It is empowered to rank all proposed federally funded transportation projects in the region, thus determining which are most likely to get funding and how fast. In making the rankings, the agency will take into account a wide range of land-use factors, such as provision for open space, access to public transit, affordable housing and others. Previously, land-use and transportation policies were considered separately.

The Tribune's Richard Wronski has already reported on [CMAP's transportation wish list for new projects](#), including an extension of Illinois Highway 53 through central Lake County and

an extension of the CTA's Red Line southward from its current terminus at 95th Street to 130th Street.

Even the wish list reflects an era of scarce resources.

As Wronski wrote: "Whereas legendary Chicago planner Daniel Burnham is credited with the famous quote, 'Make no little plans. They have no magic . . .,' the message from Go to 2040 seems to be: 'Make no big plans. We have no money.'

"Instead of backing multibillion-dollar projects such as the proposed suburb-to-suburb Metra STAR Line and the outer-ring Prairie Parkway in Kane and Kendall counties, CMAP sets more modest goals, such as completing the Elgin-O'Hare Expressway and building a western bypass around O'Hare International Airport."

In the wake of today's event, Wronski adds that the final Go to 2040 plan specifically asks federal officials to revise the "New Starts" program, which funds major new transit projects, so that older systems like Chicago have the option to use these federal grants for badly needed maintenance and modernization of existing systems.

This is a major issue with CTA, Metra and Pace, who complain they are tens of billions of dollars behind in keeping equipment in good repair.

Go to 2040 also signals CMAP's intention to take a more active role in scrutinizing big-ticket public transportation projects. CMAP has the authority as conduit for federal funding to nix projects that are not deemed cost-effective.

Nevertheless, Randy Blankenhorn said, "Our goal isn't to use that hammer (statutory authority) to veto projects. Our goal is to work with the transit agencies. Our role is to help them make the hard decisions."

For example, it's much cheaper to implement bus rapid-transit service instead of costly heavy rail projects. This could very well happen as an alternative to the proposed suburb-to-suburb STAR Line.

CMAP plans an active campaign to educate the public about the plan and implement the recommendations.

"We don't want a document to look good on coffee tables," Blankenhorn said. "We need to implement this plan. The education process is the key to making this successful."