



MINNPOST'S
END-OF-YEAR
**WISH LIST
CAMPAIGN**

End-of-year gifts
starting to trickle
in. Thanks Diana!

DONATE BY DEC. 22!

MINNPOST'S
YPN
YOUNG
PROFESSIONALS
NETWORK

Jaycees honor 10
outstanding young
Minnesotans

facebook twitter

MINNPOST.COM/YPN

THOUGHTFUL CONTENT. THOUGHTFUL COMMENTS.

Click here to sign up to be a MinnPost commenter and join a quality conversation.

Cityscape is supported in part by a grant from the Central Corridor Funders Collaborative.



Email PRINT COMMENT SHARE

Metro Chicago's planning aims high; the Twin Cities', not so much



MinnPost photo by Steve Berg

Chicago, an ambitious city with no small plans.

By Steve Berg | Monday, Nov. 22, 2010

It's common for Midwestern cities to aim low, to fall back on the excuse that they're just Midwestern cities happy to have made the B honor roll. Trouble is, there's always Chicago, an obviously Midwestern city that, when it comes to architecture and urban design, always seems to set the bar higher. It has done so again with its newly published regional plan, "GO TO 2040."

Taking as its theme Daniel Burham's famous dictum "make no little plans," Chicago offers a strategy to fit the times, and it challenges other Midwestern metropolitan places to follow in its wake.

The centerpiece: Chicago and its suburbs propose to handle half of their population growth over the next 30 years on infill — land that has already been urbanized. The aim is efficiency and sustainability for cities and lower costs for residents and businesses. It's a profoundly conservative approach that saves public and private dollars, protects the environment and lowers energy consumption. The Twin Cities should follow Chicago's lead.

Here are the basics: Chicago and its inner seven counties (population 9 million) expect to grow by another 2.4 million people by 2040. The Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP) suggests that half of those additional people be settled on new ground, but that the other half (1.2 million) be absorbed by existing communities, mainly on vacant lots and stretches of underused land totaling about 100,000 acres. That averages out to about 12 people per acre, or 7,700 people per square.

Supported by a grant from



Cityscape focuses on urban life in our metro area. Topics range from urban design and architecture to transportation, highways, traffic, transit, walking and biking. Cityscape also examines important urban issues — such as real estate development, education, crime, poverty and family life — as well as the arts, sports and entertainment in our community.

minnpost.com/steveberg

Steve Berg sharpened his interest in urban design, transportation and metropolitan affairs as an editorial writer for the Star Tribune. His 31 years at the paper also included more than a decade covering politics from its Washington Bureau and five years as the newspaper's National Correspondent. Altogether, Berg has covered a wide-range of stories in 43 states. He and his wife live in downtown Minneapolis. He's at sberg [at] minnpost [dot] com.



RECENT POSTS BY STEVE BERG

Adjusting the color on your urban design monitor: less blue, more red

URBAN AFFAIRS | 11/24/10 8:36 AM

Metro Chicago's planning aims high; the Twin Cities', not so much

URBAN AFFAIRS | 11/22/10 9:20 AM

Economist: MSP needs more marketing, more entrepreneurship, more courage

ECONOMY | 11/19/10 8:56 AM

A new Library Park picks up steam in downtown Minneapolis; seen as a catalyst for future development

URBAN AFFAIRS | 11/17/10 8:24 AM

A new upscale rental market in

MinnPost thanks these major sponsors:

Sponsor of
Market Tracker





Sponsor of
Second Opinion



Greater Twin Cities
United Way

Sponsor of
Community Voices



Sponsor of
Community Sketchbook

Our major advertisers



Our in-kind partners

[Search Engine Marketing](#)



MinnPost thanks these
generous donors:

INDIVIDUALS AND FOUNDATIONS

Blandin Foundation
Otto Bremer Foundation
Sage & John Cowles
David & Vicki Cox
Toby & Mae Dayton
Ethics and Excellence in
Journalism Foundation
Sam & Stacey Heins
John S. and James L.
Knight Foundation
Joel & Laurie Kramer
Lee Lynch & Terry Saario
Martin & Brown
Foundation
The McKnight Foundation
The Minneapolis
Foundation

CORPORATE LEADERSHIP CIRCLE

General Mills Foundation
Medtronic Foundation

(See all donors [here.](#))



At first glance, that shouldn't strike you as impressive density. The city of Chicago, at 12,500 people per square mile (20 per acre), is nearly twice as dense. It's only when you compare Chicago's 2040 plan to the Twin Cities' 2030 plan for growth that you realize the extraordinary gesture Chicago has pulled off and, conversely, the astonishingly low aim of Minneapolis-St. Paul.

Our split is 70-30

This metro region's [2030 plan](#) calls for a 70-30 split; 70 percent on fresh ground and only 30 percent on infill. That result produces big expenses for new sewers, streets, schools, energy consumption and other features while leaving vacant or underused thousands of acres of infill already served by infrastructure. Seems like a waste.

As puzzling is the Twin Cities' relatively low aim for density along transit corridors. Transit-oriented developments (TODs) are, after all, the new "stars" of urban planning and design — nodes that blend transit with housing, working, shopping and entertainment. The idea is to capitalize on walkable *proximity* while offering an auto-free choice for longer trips. But the TODs proposed along the Central and Southwest light-rail lines hold density to a modest level — generally 7 to 10 units per acre, a formula that might produce buildings of two to four stories along University Avenue in St. Paul, for example. That's not much bang for the buck.

At a zoning hearing Friday before the city's Planning Commission, Jim Erkel of the [Minnesota Center for Environmental Advocacy](#), pushed for higher densities. Quoting from the movie "Field of Dreams," he suggested that St. Paul "go the distance" by making it easier for developers to build taller buildings near stations.

Erkel's point is a good one. By holding University Avenue to heights of two to four stories, the city is producing densities only slightly above current citywide averages — 11 people per acre instead of 9. That's hardly a good use of light rail's capacity to grow population and vitality — or to take cars off the freeways.

Chicago's problems are similar

Chicago aims for a higher return from TODs and its 2040 plan artfully articulates the challenge facing most major cities, including ours.

"During decades of rapid but largely uncoordinated expansion, the region grew in patterns that were not sustainable," it begins. "New homes cropped up in areas that were difficult to reach by automobile and virtually impossible by public transit. Jobs created were often far from the region's residential centers, keeping commuters tied up in traffic and wasting billions of dollars in lost time and fuel. [Implementing this plan] is Metropolitan Chicago's best chance to begin reversing long range trends like these, which are barriers to prosperity and livability."

The plan, approved unanimously last month by the region's elected leaders, was the product of three years of research and public input. The purpose was to consider new economic and environmental realities in rethinking land development, transportation energy, education and quality of life. The plan focuses on livable communities, human capital, efficient governance and regional mobility.

All of those are interrelated, Randy Blankenhorn, CMAP's director, said in a statement. "Promoting a good balance of jobs and housing will give residents the option to live near to where they work, which lets them spend less time commuting," he said.

The plan seeks changes in existing rules that promote "big-box sprawl" and, in a move expected to stir controversy, suggests an 8-cent

downtown Minneapolis? Maybe

MINNEAPOLIS | 11/15/10 9:41 AM

New Crosstown Commons is the real deal -- but probably the last of the big highway projects

TRANSIT | 11/12/10 8:39 AM

Scott County urges the Met Council to suspend its new transportation plan; wants more highways, claims unfair procedures

TRANSIT | 11/10/10 8:24 AM

Four finalists selected in competition to design Minneapolis' Upper Riverfront

URBAN AFFAIRS | 11/8/10 4:29 PM

Election fallout: Republicans offer different solutions, but metro challenges haven't changed

URBAN AFFAIRS | 11/8/10 9:19 AM

If GOP keeps austerity promises, big metro projects on rail, housing and research may be pared or eliminated

ELECTION '10 | 11/4/10 10:12 AM

A redo for the West Bank? Central LRT to bring changes

TRANSIT | 10/27/10 8:16 AM

Have we designed our way to disaster? An interview with U design dean Tom Fisher

URBAN AFFAIRS | 10/25/10 9:02 AM

increase in the state gasoline tax as well as user fees to finance road repairs and to expand transit.

Themes that match market trends

Its themes reflect a new consensus among planners: more livability, lower costs for households and governments, more options for transportation, more efficiency, transparency and collaboration among governments, a greater emphasis on water and greenery, improved health and access to local foods, increased energy efficiency, more land development that supports transit, improved education and work force development, better support for economic innovation and industry clusters.

These goals seem to harmonize with market trends. They seem to anticipate the kinds of communities that people will want and need in the coming decades. The question is whether goals like these have become post-partisan or whether the newly energized political right will attempt to tear down the whole structure of metropolitan planning.

It has become a target of some tea partiers, for example, who see planning as part of a global conspiracy to herd people into "human habitation zones." (See Orwell)

Some tea partiers see planning as [a trampling of basic liberties](#) and a threat to private property. During the fall campaign, Colorado's Republican candidate for governor, Dan Maes, accused his opponent of using [a bike-sharing program](#) to turn Denver into a "United Nations community" as part of a global conspiracy called Agenda 21.

But serious people who travel the country see clearly that communities suffer from too little planning, not too much. Take Chicago, for example. GO TO 2040 is its first truly regional comprehensive plan since Burnham's famous document of 1909. That's too long to wait, even for a city that makes no small plans.

URBAN AFFAIRS | MON, NOV 22 2010 9:20 AM

Like what you just read? [Support high-quality journalism](#) in Minnesota by becoming a member of MinnPost.

11 Comments: [Hide/Show Comments](#)

E-mail address

Password

Remember me for two weeks.

[Forgot Password?](#) | [Register to Comment](#)

MinnPost does not permit the use of foul language, personal attacks or the use of language that may be libelous or interpreted as inciting hate or sexual harassment. User comments are reviewed by moderators to ensure that comments meet these standards and adhere to MinnPost's [terms of use](#) and [privacy policy](#).

We intend for this area to be used by our readers as a place for civil, thought-provoking and high-quality public discussion. **In order to achieve this, MinnPost requires that all commenters register and post comments with their actual names and place of residence.** [Register here](#) to comment.

RECENTLY PUBLISHED POSTS