Planning agency launches data-driven website

By Bob Spoerl Medill News Service | Posted: Monday, November 22, 2010 12:00 am

CHICAGO | Want to compare 2004 foreclosure rates in Highland Park and Oak Park? Curious about the total farm acreage in McHenry County? Or the demographic breakdowns of Bronzeville, Wrigley Park and Bucktown?

The Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning has launched MetroPulse, a website featuring a comprehensive range of Chicago regional data. It's part of the planning agency's Go To 2040 initiative for decadeslong sustainable development in northeastern Illinois, and is a collaboration with the Chicago Community Trust.

MetroPulse, (metropulsechicago.org) will allow users to sift through facts and figures for seven Chicago-area counties in categories such as education, land use, housing and culture.

The site is free, with content tailored to four categories of users: policymakers, media, researchers and the general public, according to MetroPulse's organizers. The site will organize studies from hundreds of research groups, allowing users to crunch numbers and manipulate information that's not always readily accessible.

"We're hoping that one of the functions of MetroPulse will make meaningful data easy to find in ways that it is not now," said James Lewis, senior program officer with the Chicago Community Trust.

Planning agency officials say the website will provide more than 200 indicators -- ways to measure regional growth, development and society.

Each indicator -- from unemployment rates to median household income -- comes with suggestions for related indicators to further refine or broaden the information. Users can access data in grid, chart or map form.

In a promotional video for the site, North Chicago Mayor Leon Rockingham Jr. said he thinks MetroPulse will be useful in decision-making.

"You have a tool that is at your fingertips," Rockingham said. "What that does is help my staff be more efficient and effective."

The agency would not disclose how much money was spent on developing the website, which was paid for out of its own budget and support from the Chicago Community Trust, a philanthropic group that funds local projects.

In addition to providing the public with more information, planners hope MetroPulse will make government agencies more transparent.

For data geeks who want to look up local high school graduation rates on the go, MetroPulse developers are working on an iPhone application, slated for release this winter.