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Agency pushes better transit, tax policies

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Randy Blankenhorn (left), executive director of the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, Richton Park Mayor Rick Reinbold (center) and Will County Executive Larry Walsh (right) participate in a panel discussion Monday during the Southland Chamber Re

Modernizing the Chicago region's transportation infrastructure and reforming tax policies are among the keys to boosting the metro area's competitiveness, Southland business leaders were told Monday.

But realizing those lofty goals will largely be the job of the region's business community, according to representatives of the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning who spoke before the Chicago Southland Chamber of Commerce.

The agency suggests in its "Go to 2040" plan that multibillion-dollar investments are needed to improve roads as well as passenger and freight rail lines, and a more equitable tax system is essential to making Illinois and the Chicago area more hospitable to businesses.

The road map to "sustainable prosperity," as the plan describes it, was released last fall, and its members touched on highlights of the study at the chamber's meeting in Tinley Park.

Transportation investments will have to consider an expected doubling in the volume of truck traffic in the Chicago region in coming decades, and a need to improve the flow of freight rail traffic through the area, said Randy Blankenhorn, the agency's executive director and a former urban planning expert with the Illinois Department of Transportation.

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He said more federal dollars will be required to fund a project that Illinois and freight railroads have committed to in order to break up freight-train logjams.

"We need a national vision and national investment strategy for freight," he said.

The Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning supports changing how property and sales taxes are levied to make the tax system "more predictable, transparent and fair," according to the "Go to 2040" plan. Residents and businesses in the Chicago area are hamstrung by a "1960s tax policy," Blankenhorn said.

"We're not talking about raising or lowering taxes, that's not what this is about," he said.

The planning agency, however, does favor extending the sales tax to cover services, which it says could result in lower sales tax rates on goods. It also recommends increasing the state's gasoline

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tax by 8 cents per gallon to better fund road maintenance budgets.

Created a little more than five years ago by the state Legislature, the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning's members include elected, business and civic leaders. Palos Hills Mayor Gerald Bennett is its board chairman, and Richton Park Mayor Rick Reinbold is on the board of directors.

Reinbold, who was at Monday's chamber meeting, said "Go to 2040" isn't a directive but a "guideline" for the region's future growth.

To keep it from gathering dust on some shelf, however, business leaders, such as the chamber, need to press policymakers on implementing its recommendations, Blankenhorn said.

"The business community needs to support (the plan) to make it happen," he said.