

# Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning picks new leader

By **Richard Wronski**  
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**J**oseph Szabo, who rose from train conductor to head of the Federal Railroad Administration, was tapped Wednesday as the new executive director of the agency that oversees land use and transportation planning for the Chicago region.

Szabo, 57, was selected unanimously after a national search by the board of the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning. Szabo becomes CMAP's second executive director, after Randy Blankenhorn left to become Illinois transportation secretary under Gov. Bruce Rauner. His salary is \$200,000 a year.

CMAP is perhaps best known as the agency whose 2013 report challenged then-Gov. Pat Quinn's pet project, the proposed Illiana toll road, as "broadly incompatible with the overall goals and recommendations" of the region's long-range master plan and for exposing the state to "extensive financial risk."

Szabo said that his top priorities are to enhance CMAP's reputation as one of the nation's best-regarded planning agencies and to help "strengthen our region and enhance the livability of communities and promote economic growth."

"We need to have a regional focus," Szabo said. "When we compete together, and not against each other, we achieve the greatest economic benefit for the region."

The General Assembly created CMAP in 2005. It is a consolidation of two agencies, the Northeastern Illinois Planning Commission and the Chicago Area Transportation Study.

In addition to creating the region's long-range comprehensive plan, Go To 2040, CMAP funnels millions of dollars a year in federal funds to the region.

CMAP's board of directors is made up of local officials from Cook, DuPage, Kane, Kendall, Lake, McHenry, and Will counties.

The region is fortunate to have a leader of Szabo's background, said Gerald Bennett, chair of the CMAP board and mayor of Palos Hills.

"Metropolitan Chicago and the state as a whole are facing unprecedented challenges, such as the need to rebuild crumbling infrastructure, give residents options to live nearer to where they work and expand parks and open space, to name a few of our priorities," Bennett said in a statement. "Joe knows our region's, our state's and our nation's transportation system as well as anyone."

Szabo joined CMAP as a senior fellow in January after serving six years as administrator of the FRA, part of the U.S. Department of Transportation. He led a staff of over 900 in Washington, D.C., and at field offices across the nation.

Szabo was the first FRA chief to come from the ranks of rail workers, having served as a conductor and switchman

with the Illinois Central Railroad and Metra, where his father also worked for 40 years.

Szabo was a zoning commission member in his hometown of Riverdale, where he later served as a park district commissioner, village trustee and mayor. He also was a member of the South Suburban Mayors and Managers Association executive board and transportation committee, and the regional Council of Mayors executive committee.

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