

Former railroad czar to head Chicago metropolitan planning board



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The region's new chief planner, a rail expert, will have his hands full tackling the complicated knot that ties up freight and commuter trains here and across the nation along with other challenges.

The Chicago Metropolitan Area for Planning board of directors picked former Federal Railway Administrator Joseph Szabo, a Chicagoan, as executive director Wednesday.

Szabo started his career as a conductor and switchman with the Illinois Central Railroad and Metra, where his father worked. He was Riverdale mayor and a member of the regional Council of Mayors.

"For me, this is a return to my roots in local government," said Szabo in a statement. "Municipalities are the most representative form of government, and CMAP depends on its strong connection to our region's towns, cities, and counties.

"While at U.S. DOT, I recognized that CMAP is viewed nationally as a model of regional collaboration. I look forward to working with the agency board, stakeholders, and staff to continue that record of excellence on behalf of this region that I love."

CMAP coordinates planning, ranging from transportation to housing, in Cook, DuPage, Kane, Kendall, Lake, McHenry and Will counties. It developed a blueprint for the future with its GoTo 2040 plan and took a stand against the proposed Illiana Expressway in 2013, criticizing it as too costly for the expected benefits.

Funding for transportation and infrastructure is lacking at state and federal levels for projects including CREATE, a program aimed at reducing freight congestion in the region by building bridges and adding track.

Szabo replaces former CMAP leader Randy Blankenhorn, who now is Illinois Department of Transportation secretary.

"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," CMAP Chairman Gerald Bennett said in a statement.

"To a significant extent, his highly varied background enables .be to embody these regional aspirations."