

Planning consolidation considered unlikely



Matt Orenchuk, a transit planning consultant from Connetics Transportation Group, highlights some of the proposed changes to Hobart residents as the Northwestern Indiana Regional Planning Commission (NIRPC) hosted a public input session on the regional transportation system at the Festival Park Community Center in Hobart, Ind., on June 6, 2016. (Mark Davis / Post-Tribune)

By **Tim Zorn**
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Fifty years after its founding, Northwest Indiana's regional planning agency faced a threat to its existence this year.

A U.S. Department of Transportation rule proposed in June could, if approved, merge the Northwestern Indiana Regional Planning Commission with two similar agencies in the greater Chicago area.

But a flood of opposition — including from the affected agencies and from members of Congress — probably will sideline that proposal, NIRPC Executive Director Ty Warner told the agency's executive board.

"I'd be extremely surprised if this rule became final," Warner said.

The proposal, reportedly instigated by Transportation Secretary **Anthony Foxx**, would have required metropolitan planning agencies in urban areas to consolidate or to prepare unified transportation plans. That would have meant merging NIRPC with the Chicago Metropolitan Area for Planning and the Southeastern

Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission, all of which are in the Chicago urban area. CMAP covers seven counties in Illinois and while SEWRPC represents a seven-county region of Wisconsin.

Proponents have argued that, across the country, too many planning agencies like NIRPC serve roughly the same area.

All three Chicago-area agencies oppose the merger idea, Warner said, as do U.S. Rep. [Pete Visclosky](#), Indiana's and Illinois' senators, both parties' leaders on the U.S. House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, and most of the written comments submitted to the rule-makers.

CMAP noted, for example, that each state in the Chicago area has different road and planning requirements, making creating a single transportation plan difficult.

Warner added that NIRPC already coordinates with other planning agencies on projects that cross state lines. "There's no reason for consolidation," he said.

NIRPC began in 1966 as a transportation planning agency serving Lake and Porter counties. LaPorte County joined in 1979.

Also at the recent meeting:

- NIRPC executives and board members honored two retiring staff members who have served for most of the agency's existence.

Steve Strains, NIRPC's deputy director and director of planning, has been with NIRPC since 1973, and transit planner Belinda Petroskey has been there since 1975.

John Swanson, NIRPC's executive director from 2004 through 2012, said Strains has been "a resource, a coach, a champion" for the agency and was a leader in the effort to create the 2040 Plan, the region's latest long-range plan. In 2013, that plan won the American Planning Association's Daniel Burnham Award, which Swanson called "the Academy Award for planners."

Petroskey, Swanson said, "found her true passion in public transportation," which she believes is critical for the region's residents. In the past year, for example, she coordinated efforts to plan for public transportation in Portage and Hobart.

- The executive board approved several road projects, including the Indiana Department of Transportation's planned realignment of U.S. 12 and U.S. 20 in Gary. A new connection between the two highways will be built about 925 feet east of Lake Street, and the state will give up a stretch of U.S. 12 between the current intersection of the two highways to the new connection. That project, estimated to cost \$2.3 million when built in 2019, will accommodate the [South Shore Line](#)'s plans to build a second set of tracks between Gary and Michigan City.

- The board approved an agreement to plan for new information signs along bike trails in Lake and Porter counties. The agreement includes Lake County and the cities and towns along the trails.

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