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Panel talks suburban sprawl, planning, with 2050 in mind



Susan Sarkauskas

Should the Chicago area resume outward expansion as it did for the last 70 years?

What could regional planning do to affect how the area will be by 2050?

Two land planners, a real estate investment expert and a politician chewed on these ideas and more at a Chicago Metropolitan Agency on Planning forum in Aurora Tuesday.

CMAP is the state-designated regional planning agency for Cook, DuPage, Kane, Kendall, Lake, McHenry and Will counties. It's working on a new comprehensive plan called "On to 2050." The agency addresses issues related to livability, mobility and economy.

The panelists were Carolyn Schofield, a former McHenry County Board member; Collete English Dixon of River Forest, owner of Libra Investments Group; Chuck Marohn of Minnesota, engineer and founder of Strong Towns; and Curt Paddock, land-use director for Will County.

Paddock was perhaps the bluntest of the speakers.

"I have the perspective of having gone to these kind of seminars for 40 years and hearing the same set of issues over and over again," he said. That would include hand-wringing over suburban sprawl taking over farmland and planners wanting to "bring everybody under the glass dome of the central city," he said. "The only thing that will do that is \$5-a-gallon gasoline."

As for 2050, he said he believes the fundamental development patterns the Chicago area now has will continue and that inner-ring suburbs' distress will grow.

The success of regional approach depends on politicians' will to follow the suggestions of planners, he said. Giving a regional agency some authority to rule on matters such as boundary agreements, incorporations and annexation could help.

And it was largely the 2008 recession, not previous regional plans, that halted the sprawl of the 1990s and early 2000s, he said.

Dixon talked about the seemingly different wants buyers in their 30s have now compared to previous generations. They want the affordability of suburban life, but the conveniences of an urban existence, she said.

She also said that she does not foresee a return to the building of huge residential subdivisions, but more focus on infill.

Marohn said regional planning is often a well-intentioned "exercise in wishful thinking," and based on past assumptions that aren't true, such as that outward growth will continue to happen. He spoke of the costs of repairing and maintaining infrastructure put in anticipation of growth and said the current model is economically unsustainable for local governments.

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