

# Illinois Issues

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# THE HITCH IN THE PLAN

*A new Chicago metropolitan planning agency is advisory only, making it no more powerful than its predecessors*

by Alan Mammoser

The new regional authority for northeastern Illinois has delivered an ambitious inaugural agenda to the governor and state lawmakers. The *Strategic Report on Visioning, Governance and Funding*, issued by the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning — CMAP for short — promises profound changes in land use and transportation planning for that congested section of the state.

The new agency, created to guide local governments, is advisory only, with no more power than the regional agencies it replaced. And it faces the same challenge: a fragmented landscape in which a multiplicity of local authorities resist coordination. Still, the willingness to consolidate planning into one agency may signal a new era of cooperation for metropolitan Chicago.

CMAP is the result of last year's state Regional Planning Act, which ordered the fusion of two long-standing agencies: the Northeastern Illinois Planning Commission and the Chicago Area Transportation Study. The new agency, which combined the staffs of both organizations, replaces the Northeastern Illinois Planning Commission, taking up its concern for natural resource and land use planning. But CMAP broadens the agenda to address housing, social services and economic development.

On its face, the new agency appears well-equipped to provide strong leadership, with a 15-member board guaranteeing a kind of proportional

representation. Those board members come from the city of Chicago, suburban Cook County and the surrounding counties. Officials in these areas each appoint five members, reflecting the general three-way distribution of the metropolitan region's population. This makes a representative yet compact board, one that compares favorably to the catchall nature of the old planning agency's board, which had 34 members appointed by a confusing array of agencies and authorities.

Still, CMAP is not as novel as it seems. The two agencies that preceded it also began with great expectations and bold initiatives. That was 50 years ago, when auto-era sprawl was just beginning and regional planners wanted to shape

growth patterns in outer Cook, Lake and DuPage counties. And it's worth remembering that both began as formidable research and planning organizations.

The Northeastern Illinois Planning Commission produced its famous Finger Plan in 1968, which foresaw suburban development oriented to the region's rail lines, the "fingers." The commission produced a comprehensive plan update in the 1970s, with multiple components covering a wide range of regional concerns. And it had some power to implement those plans, thanks to the federal government.

Back then, the feds asked regional agencies to review local government applications for such things as sewer plants, federally financed housing and open-space acquisition. The commission also exercised authority to review locals' applications to expand wastewater service areas. The required reviews often helped the commission compel local governments to adopt policies and ordinances that addressed regional concerns.

The Chicago Area Transportation Study also began with great promise, as reflected in its 1962 metropolitan plan, which became a national model for its technical acuity. Eventually, however, its plans became little more than wish lists of projects submitted by the transportation agencies on its policy committee. These were combined with vague policy statements in the federally mandated Regional Transportation Plan.

## Regional Planning Act

**Signed** into law in August 2005

**Combined** the Chicago Area Transportation Study and the Northeastern Illinois Planning Commission

**Created** a regional planning board named the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP)

**Called** for a board with 15 members appointed by local elected officials from the city of Chicago and suburban Cook, DuPage, Kane, Kendall, Lake, McHenry and Will counties

That plan, produced every three years, never held much relationship to the comprehensive regional plans created by the Northeastern Illinois Planning Commission.

Persistent criticism from civic groups finally put pressure on state officials to create CMAP. The new agency aims to become the pre-eminent provider of regional information and data. That in itself is a much-needed role, one the previous regional planning agencies have fallen far short of in recent years.

But whether CMAP can advance beyond information provider to effective planner remains to be seen. The region now sprawls into Will, Kendall, McHenry and even DeKalb counties, where local officials continue to press for an outer ring of highways to support and sustain growth. Some even want a new airport. Few want guidance or advice from an agency downtown.

The great challenge for CMAP will be to remain regional, to continually lift itself above local concerns, to speak strongly and independently for the whole metropolitan area. This will be difficult to do over the long term. After all, the Northeastern Illinois Planning Commission began with a fairly efficient, compact board of 19 members, the bulk of them appointed by the governor and Chicago's mayor. Later, the board was expanded to 25 and, eventually, 34 members. This gradual expansion reflected the continual pull of local prerogatives. It strengthened the position of suburban mayors but left the agency unable to effectively address such critical regional issues as housing. Many commission board members resisted any perceived intrusion into local affairs.

While CMAP as an advisory agency inherits the planning commission's weakness, it enjoys one newfound

strength: bringing the transportation planners into its fold. This should encourage what regionalists have long called for — the "integration" of land use and transportation planning. It's a fairly vague notion, but the idea is to make transportation facilities serve broader community development goals. In other words, land use planning — determining the design of communities — will take precedence.

Successful integration of these sometimes conflicting interests assumes CMAP has clear authority to set out regional transportation priorities that support its regional land use schemes.

## Metropolitan area challenges

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**253 million hours a year** residents spend in traffic delays

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**151 million gallons of fuel** used each year in traffic jams

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**\$4 billion** spent annually on wasted fuel

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**80 percent increase** in traffic projected in two decades

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**35 percent boost** in housing prices from 2000 to 2004

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**5 percent growth** in household incomes from 2000 to 2004

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**2 million more people** expected in the next 25 years

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**65 and older population** expected to double by 2030

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**23 townships** may suffer water deficits by 2020

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SOURCE: *Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning's Strategic Report on Visioning, Governance and Funding* at [www.chicagoareaplanning.org](http://www.chicagoareaplanning.org)

Thus, CMAP conceivably could guide regional development patterns, at least indirectly, through the placement of transportation infrastructure.

But this requires CMAP to become the one regional authority in control of the Regional Transportation Plan, with its transportation goals embedded in broader comprehensive strategies for the metropolitan region. Unfortunately, CMAP has not been given this power. The transportation planning agency's policy committee, composed of related agencies and service providers, continues to have final say over the Regional Transportation Plan.

CMAP might have asked in its recent strategic report for the dissolution of the transportation planning committee, or its subordination to CMAP, perhaps through demotion to committee status within the new agency. CMAP board members declined to do so, leaving an awkward arrangement in which the two boards must coexist.

This outcome doesn't bode well for integrated regional land use and transportation planning. The question must be revisited, with eventual certification of CMAP as the official, federally recognized metropolitan planning organization for northeastern Illinois.

Despite the enormous challenges it faces, CMAP might achieve what the Northeastern Illinois Planning Commission never could. Back in 1968, the commission never intended to implement its regional plan through federally required reviews. Rather, the agency wanted to implement the Finger Plan through voluntary intergovernmental agreements, with municipalities and counties committed to meeting regional standards. Such regional-local cooperation was never achieved in a significant way.

CMAP came about through cooperation of local leaders. Municipal officials, acting through the Metropolitan Mayors Caucus, were involved in its creation from the beginning. They limited its powers, to be sure, but generally they supported the idea of a new combined agency.

After decades of sprawl, the relentless spread of traffic congestion and continual environmental damage, most local leaders recognize the need for regionalism of some kind. This may signal a new era in which local officials see some sense in conforming their initiatives to regional plans. The success or failure of CMAP lies in their hands. □

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