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Road to Illiana paved with poor decisions

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By Joe Schwelbman and Alan Mannosier March 11, 2014

The Chicago region emerges from a rough winter not only with thousands of potholes to fill but with a crater-size gap in its credibility to discern good transportation projects from bad ones. When the political storm surrounding the proposed Illiana Tollway cleared in October, Illinois taxpayers were left on the hook to pay potentially tens of millions of dollars in costs not covered by the project's hoped-for private financing. Whether or not you agree with us that the Illiana plan is flawed — its problems are summarized well in a Crain's editorial published last month ("Illiana paved with costly consequences") — we think it is indisputable that the manner in which it was approved points to a serious problem in the decision-making processes in place.

Responsibility for approving the Illiana fell into the purview of the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning. CMAP was well-prepared to evaluate it, having spent years crafting a broad consensus plan called Go To 2040, a framework that seeks to bind transportation spending to a larger set of regional quality-of-life and economic development goals. Its "fiscally constrained" transportation component ensures that major projects are in line with funding that is reasonably expected, and that such projects are in clear alignment with these goals.

In order to become eligible for federal funding and open up a bidding process, the Illiana had to earn its way onto the plan's select priority list. CMAP staff looked at it and wasn't convinced, judging it to be not in accord with Go To 2040's regional priorities. And last fall the CMAP board concurred, standing behind its adopted plan even in the face of strong pressure from Illinois Gov. Pat Quinn.

NO FINAL AUTHORITY

The issue should have ended there, but in our region, it's never that simple. The CMAP board, with representatives of Chicago and seven suburban counties, doesn't have final authority to approve or block projects on the basis of whether they are in, or even broadly consistent with, the regional plan. That authority falls to another committee housed within CMAP, the so-called MPO Policy Committee, which is the federally designated Metropolitan Planning Organization for the region. It has strong links to the Illinois Department of Transportation and the governor. This committee is a legacy of a time when we had an agency for land planning and another for transportation planning — an era that ended with CMAP's creation.

To the chagrin of the board, and in spite of the technical arguments against it, the MPO committee approved the Illiana. Let's hope such wayward decisions are an aberration. CMAP, now about 10 years old, is conducting its work with increased confidence. The agency has built a strong staff that shows an impressive capacity for research and planning on local and regional levels. CMAP has shown growing willingness to take positions on critical regional issues, such as the evaluation of the benefits of congestion pricing. It deserves better.

The episode reveals that we have much work to do before we put behind us the disjointed approach to planning that has dogged us in the past. Credit to the governor for recently launching an exploration about improving the governance of our transit system.

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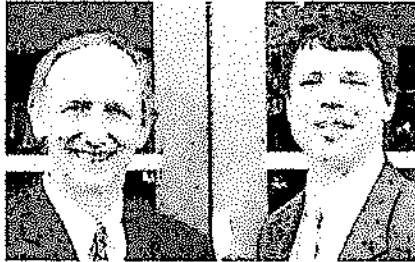


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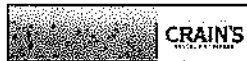
When it comes to choosing projects of regional significance, however, we clearly need a similar discussion, lest we buy more lemons like the Illiana.



Joe Schwieterman, left, is director of the Chaddick Institute for Metropolitan Development at DePaul University. Alan Mammoser is a Chicago-based writer and regional planner. Both are co-authors of "Beyond Burnham: An Illustrated History of Planning for the Chicago Region."

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