



Preckwinkle unveils transportation vision for next 25 years

Rosalind Rossi | July 13, 2016



The Kennedy Expressway contains two of the top 20 traffic bottlenecks in the Midwest. | Sun-Times file photo

Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle on Wednesday will unveil the county's first long-term transportation plan in more than 75 years, one that expands the county's focus from roads and bridges to all forms of mobility — from walking and biking to transit and freight movement.

“Connecting Cook County 2040 Long Range Transportation Plan” will guide the transportation priorities of the country's second most populous county for roughly the next 25 years. The 81-page document cost \$1.4 million to develop and write, officials said.

With it, Cook County will join smaller counties like Kane in Illinois and larger ones like Los Angeles in California that have crafted long-term transportation visions.

“Our transportation system is one of our region’s most important assets,” Preckwinkle said in a news release. “It’s clear that Cook County must be a leader in this area.”

The plan will help guide the use of county transportation money, which will jump from \$20 million a year to \$65 million beginning in 2017 when Cook County stops diverting some motor fuel tax revenue to non-transportation areas.

In addition, officials say, the long-term blueprint should better position the county to seek competitive federal money.

The document comes after Preckwinkle’s 2012 conversion of the county’s old Highway Department, focused on county-owned roads and bridges, to a Department of Transportation and Highways with a broader mission across more modes of transportation.

The plan must still be approved by the Cook County Board, which will be briefed on it Wednesday.

Democratic Cook County Commissioner Larry Suffredin said it represents a “sea change in Cook County’s involvement in transportation” and “I’m all in on this.”

The plan lays out some broad priorities:

- support expanded transit and other transportation alternatives
- promote the region’s role as North America’s freight capital
- reduce transit deserts
- maintain existing assets
- push for more transportation dollars

The blueprint encourages Cook County to advocate for an increase in the state motor fuel tax, which has not been raised since 1991. Preckwinkle said she won’t pursue an increase immediately, although it is an option in the future.

“The point is, we need more resources,” Preckwinkle said.

The plan advocates for everything from promoting walking and biking to supporting ride-sharing and boosting transit connections — especially in southern Cook County, where residents have among the longest commutes in the county.

The plan also notes that the Chicago region is “the busiest freight hub in North America” but is also home to the nation’s largest rail bottleneck and 11 of the Midwest’s 20 worst truck bottlenecks.

Freight holds enormous economic potential because its demand is expected to nearly double over the next 25 years, the report said. Chicago's share of the pie has dwindled from 51 percent of all intermodal freight containers nationally in 2000 to 47.7 percent in 2013 as competitors have upgraded their freight transportation network.

Hundreds of different truck regulations scattered across the region have left the Chicago area with the label of "one of the least commerce-friendly places in the country," according to the county plan. As a result, it supports a plan that would "harmonize" a hornet's nest of trucking regulations and ease movement of goods.

The county blueprint applauds a public-private partnership called CREATE, short for the Chicago Region Environmental and Transportation Efficiency Program. CREATE taps both public and private rail industry dollars to attack 70 rail congestion points.

However, the report notes that CREATE's budget has ballooned from \$1.5 billion to \$4.4 billion and contends that a "major reassessment" is due.

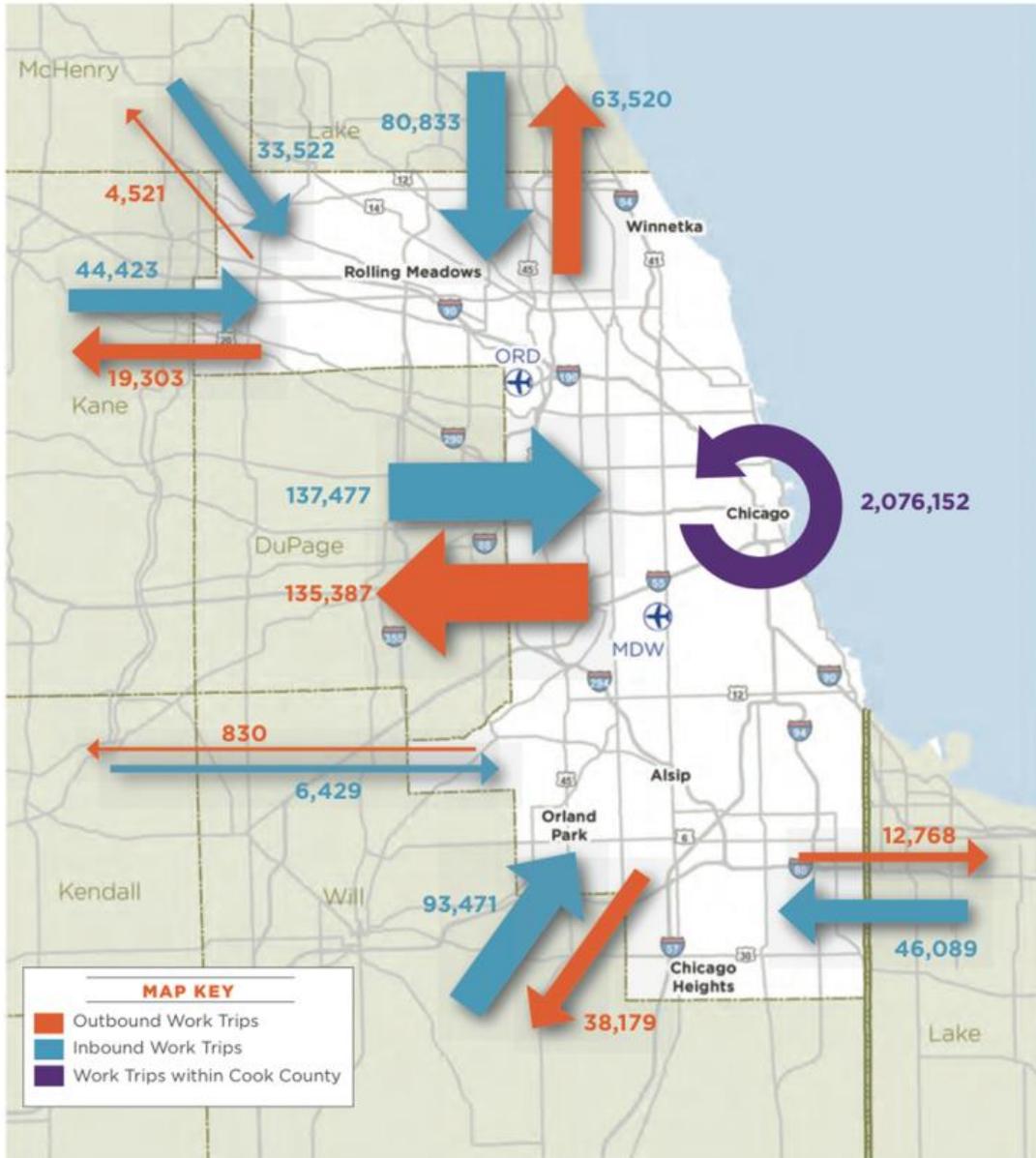
Ed Greenberg, a spokesman for the Association of American Railroads, a CREATE partner, noted that 70 percent of CREATE's projects are active or completed. So far, they have helped cut the average freight train's trip through Chicago by 11 hours.

FIGURE 1.2 DAILY WORK TRIPS – COOK COUNTY

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 Census

Total Number of Work Trips = 2,792,904

Includes work trips for the CMAP region, and Lake County, Indiana



Two million work trips begin and end in Cook County every day. Another 274,000 Cook County residents travel to neighboring counties for work and 442,000 collar county residents travel to Cook County for work. The vast majority of these trips are made by car in both Cook County (71.8 percent) and the region (80 percent). Regions must offer workers alternatives for getting to their jobs, and also anticipate growth, changes in commuting patterns, and demographic and technological trends.