

Chicago Tribune

Seeking a bigger voice on transit, freight issues, Cook offers transportation plan

Mary Wisniewski | July 13, 2016



The Chicago skyline is seen in the background as a Metra train moves out of the city on June 2, 2016.

The last time Cook County issued a transportation plan, it was 1940. That plan dealt with the then-revolutionary idea of running expressways through the city.

On Wednesday, Cook County will issue its first new long-range transportation plan in 76 years, a wide-reaching, highly detailed, 80-page document spelling out the county's priorities for promoting transit and other transportation alternatives, supporting freight rail, improving job access and increasing capital investment.

The reason for the ambitious plan is twofold. One, the nation's second-largest county will have more money for transportation projects in 2017 because of a change in the allocation of the motor fuel tax, and it wants a bigger voice at the table for regional planning. The second reason is that the county wanted to be able to qualify for additional federal dollars it would not be able to receive without a long-range plan.



New TIF districts may greenlight Belmont flyover, other transit projects

"What we're trying to do is lay out the things that need to be done to have a coherent transportation system in Cook County over the next 20 years," Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle told reporters who had seen an advance copy of the plan. "We're not going to do all this overnight."

The "Connecting Cook County" plan, which will be introduced to the County Board's roads and bridges committee on Wednesday, does not advocate for specific projects. It is instead a general statement of policy goals that echo other plans that have been put forth by agencies such as the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP). When a new project comes up — the plan gives the county a framework to help decide how to approach it, said John Yonan, county superintendent of transportation and highways.

"We need to take a more active role in what is being planned," Yonan said.

For example, the county supports the CMAP goal of doubling transit ridership by 2040, and has made expanding transit one of its priorities. The county points to the problem of "transit deserts" — areas with high demand for but no access to high-quality transit.

The majority of these deserts are in the south suburbs. The plan said that the county can help identify gaps in service and high priority needs, and make recommendations for how to fill them. The county also said that bicycles and pedestrians should be a priority and new development should include accommodations for both — a viewpoint praised by Active Transportation Alliance Executive Director Ron Burke, who provided input on the plan.



Oh, Canada! Toronto beats Chicago on transit with more riders, funding

"It's really encouraging to see the county prioritize biking, walking, and transit and acknowledge those modes are crucial to the county's long-term future and at the same time own up to the transportation equity problem, especially when it comes to getting to work," Burke said.

The county's transportation dollars are increasing because of a decision last year to stop diverting motor fuel tax funds for other uses. This means that next year, the county will have \$65 million for transportation projects — \$45 million more than this year, Yonan said. This is still a small amount relative to transportation needs overall. For example, the CTA's 2016 budget is \$1.48 billion.

The county has contributed money to multiagency projects in the past, including \$2.26 million toward viaduct rehabilitation to build The 606 trail on the Northwest Side. Cook County is currently working on other transportation-related projects, such as expanding the transit center at Rosemont on the Blue Line to accommodate riders from Pace's planned express bus service on the Jane Addams Tollway.

The long-range plan calls for county commissioners to be more active in setting transportation policies. One way this could work is by getting the 21 board members appointed by Preckwinkle and county commissioners sitting on the boards of CMAP, the RTA, Pace and Metra to work more in concert. If all five county members on the RTA Board worked as a single bloc, for example, they could veto major actions.



The big sell: Making people care about infrastructure repair

The plan also recommends that the county advocate for increased revenue for transportation from the state. One option would be an increase in the 19-cent-per-gallon state motor fuel tax, which hasn't been raised since 1991. Preckwinkle said she would not ask for such an increase right away, but it's something to look at.

"We need more resources for infrastructure, and we need to look at all the options to provide it," said Preckwinkle.

The plan also calls for review of the organization and financing of the RTA and its service boards, noting that the RTA is "handicapped by limited authority to lead a regionwide transit system."

But Preckwinkle laughed at the notion that the plan was some kind of power grab from other agencies. In fact, it was put together with the participation of other transit agencies, including the RTA and CTA, along with business and community leaders.

"It's about trying to figure out how to allocate our resources," said Preckwinkle.