



76 yrs later, county reboots transportation plan

Alan Mammoser | July 24, 2016



Chicago 1940s: Downtown traffic was less congested 70+ years ago. Today, there's a new plan for a more crowded reality.

1940. Think about how much our world has changed since then.

Global population, alone, has more than tripled. So, naturally, the modes of transportation needed to move all these new humans also have changed. Which makes it all the more surprising to learn that the nation's second most populous county — Cook County IL (*pop. 5.2 mil.*), which includes the City of Chicago — had not updated its own long-range transportation plan since the summer of 1940. That's 76 years.

Well, this summer, that document has finally been brought into the 21st Century.

Entitled ***Connecting Cook County: 2040 Long Range Transportation Plan***, it foresees a much better connected region. Not surprisingly, it emphasizes public transit, bicycling and walking, and even aims to help people in job-deprived communities to travel more easily to employment-rich areas.

- *Last week at the National Association of Counties' annual conference, Cook County IL was named to the Center for Digital Government's annual **The Top 10 Digital Counties**. For more, [click here](#).*

Rather than present an extravagant new wish list of big projects, the new 25-year plan focuses first on the modest but necessary goal of repairing and upgrading existing infrastructure. But its tilt toward non-auto alternatives, coupled with an aggressive advocacy agenda, still promises to shake up transportation planning in Chicago, throughout the cash-strapped State of Illinois, and perhaps even across the U.S.

"[It goes] against the centrifugal force that puts investments further out... and stands for improved alternatives to auto"

— Frank Beal, transportation planning expert

The new plan goes "against the centrifugal force that puts investments further and further out, and it stands for improved alternatives to auto," says transportation planning expert **Frank Beal**, a senior executive with the nonprofit Civic Consulting Alliance, and an adviser to Cook County on the plan. Beal also sits on the board of the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP), which in its own current regional plan espouses the philosophy that the county is now putting its weight behind.

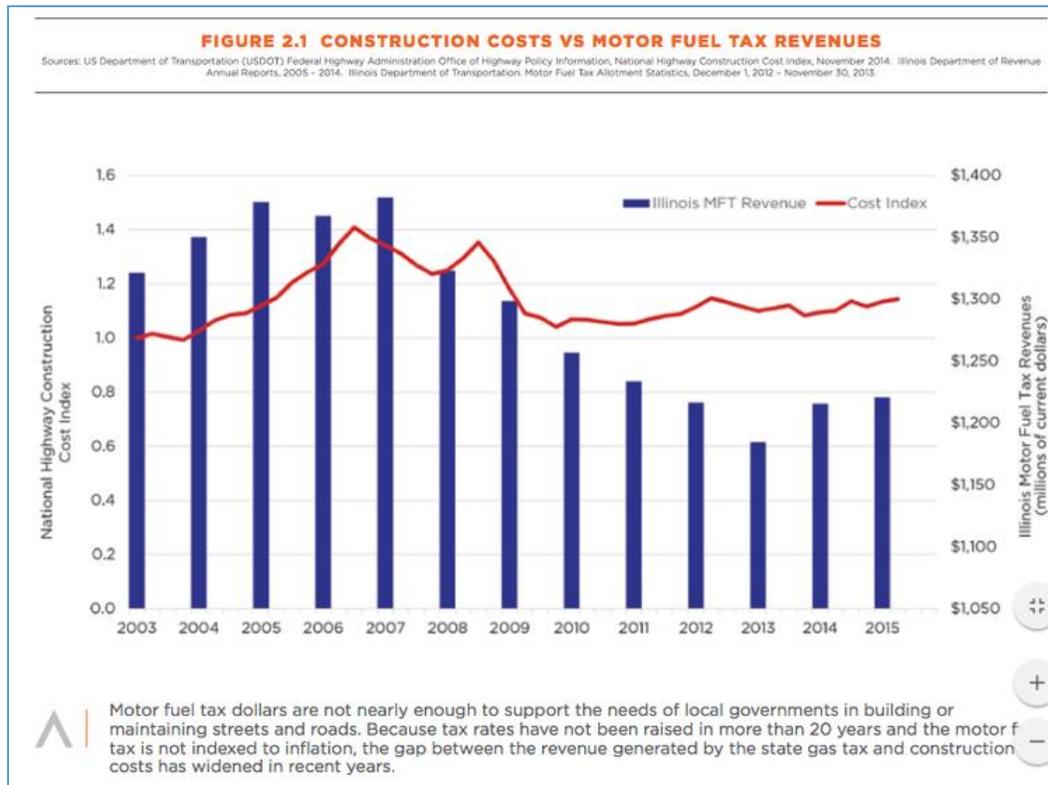
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Connecting Cook County represents a “call to action,” says Cook County Board President **Toni Preckwinkle**, who launched the effort 18 months ago. Since then, she has been proactively paving the way for change, last year ending the County's practice of diverting its share of local motor fuel tax funds into other uses. Starting in 2017, that will mean an additional \$45 million per year for county transportation work. She also changed the name of the Cook County Highway Dept. to the Dept. of Transportation and Highways, reflective of its expanded mandate. "For too

long, Cook County sat back while others made decisions affecting our residents and businesses," writes Preckwinkle in the plan's introduction.



Sources: U.S. Dept. of Transportation; Federal Highway Administration, Office of Highway Policy Information, National Highway Construction Cost Index, November 2014. Illinois Dept. of Revenue, Annual Reports, 2005 – 2014. Illinois Dept. of Transportation, Motor Fuel Tax Allotment Statistics, December 1, 2012 – November 30, 2013.

One outlet for the county's new assertiveness will be greater influence with the 15-member Regional Transportation Authority (RTA), which consists of representatives of Cook County, the City of Chicago, and the region's five other counties. Thanks to its size, Cook County holds five of the RTA board seats. The plan calls for better coordinating these board members to press for its policy agenda. "The county voice has been non-existent at the RTA; I expect to hear a Cook County voice now," says Beal, who believes that input will help RTA to perform its role better. "Of the six largest transit systems, ours is growing slowest and is least well run, compared to LA, Denver, Houston and others that are expanding."

The county's willingness to champion RTA reform has impressed **Joe Schwieterman**, director of DePaul University's Chaddick Institute for Metropolitan Development. "If they're willing to step into that hornet's nest, it shows that this plan is not just another promotional document pushing for more money for everybody," he says. "It's asking hard questions."

“New automotive tech will also change the transportation landscape. A new generation of ‘smart cars’ will have automatic warning or braking systems that reduce the risk of accidents, one of the leading causes of traffic congestion”

— Connecting Cook County, 2040 long-range transportation plan



In related news... On July 15, Chicago Mayor Emanuel announced another \$300-million expansion at O'Hare Airport, part of a multi-billion dollar, capital investment program still being developed with airline partners. (Photo: Chicago Tribune.)

AIR SUPPORT INFRASTRUCTURE

However, since Cook County does not control airports, the new plan does not directly address the future of **O'Hare International Airport**, easily the area's most famous transportation asset. Last week, Chicago Mayor **Rahm Emanuel** reasserted its importance, announcing \$300-million plans to build nine new gates for the international terminal, as well as expanding other ongoing work. The city also announced that it is finally getting its airline partners to the table to begin serious planning for a major, multi-billion dollar makeover of O'Hare's Terminal 2.

The program's urgency was underlined by Chicago Dept. of Aviation Commissioner **Ginger Evans**, who said, “In order to grow, innovate and continue to provide excellent service in a dynamic global aviation system, O'Hare needs to significantly expand and modernize.” An engineer, Evans is no stranger to tall orders, having overseen 22 years ago all construction on the \$4.8-billion Denver International Airport.

Of course, even though *Connecting Cook County* does not deal with runways and terminals, its aim to improve ground transportation infrastructure is essential for O'Hare's future, as well. In particular, the county already is rebuilding Touhy Avenue, an important component of the ongoing Elgin-O'Hare Western Access project. Overall, the plan says that a minimum of \$60 million per year is needed just to bring Cook County's roads up to “good condition.”

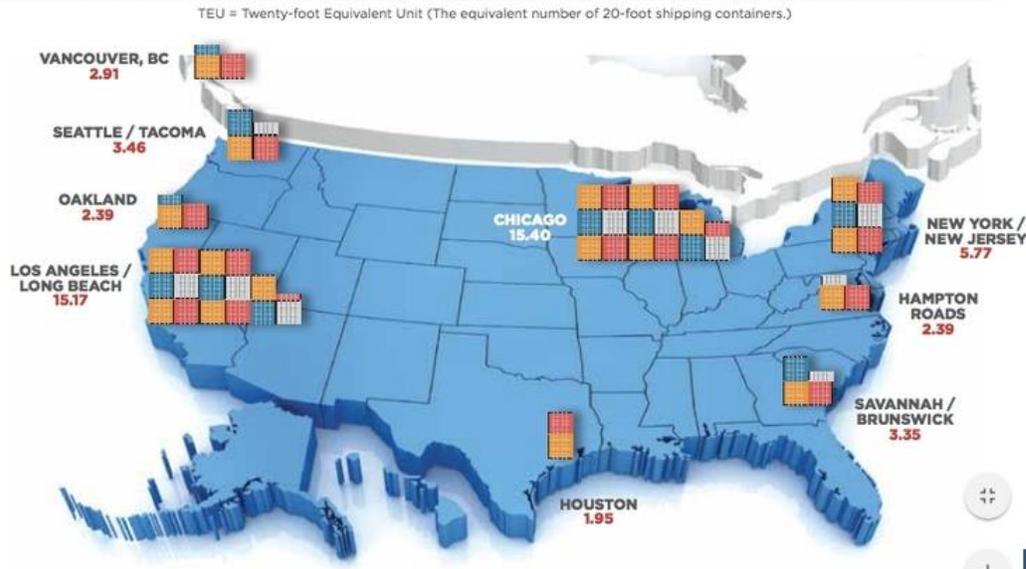
Another critical area of emphasis is rail freight. While the Chicago region is the busiest North American freight hub, it's also the largest freight bottleneck. Cook County holds most of the region's intermodal yards, where railroads bring land/sea containers from all over the world to

sort, store, transfer and reshipe. About half of all freight coming into the region goes out again, the report says.

- Below, select illustrations from the new Cook County plan.

FIGURE 1.6 BUSIEST NORTH AMERICAN PORTS BY TEU'S MOVED (IN MILLIONS)

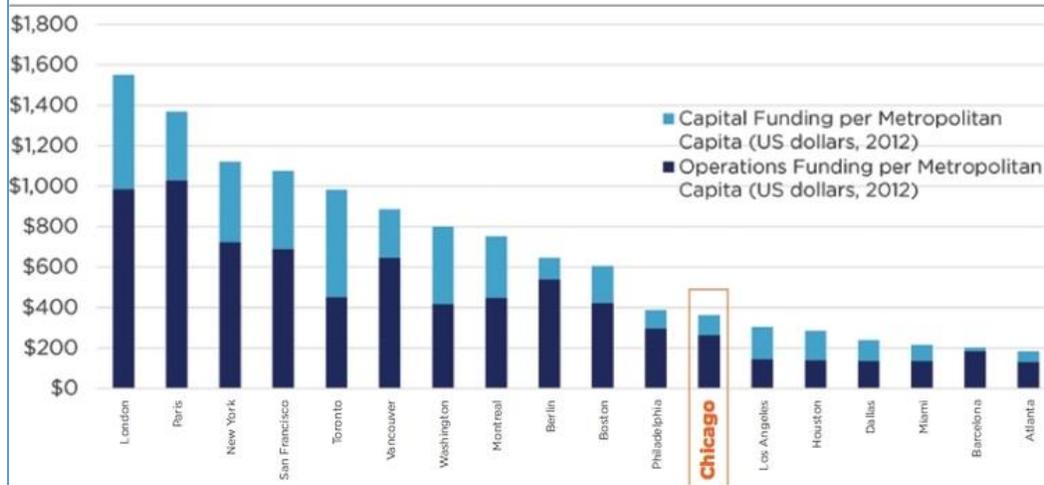
Source: Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning 2014 Estimate and Metropolitan Chicago's Freight Cluster: A Drill-Down Report on Infrastructure, Innovation, and Workforce, June 2012



The Chicago metropolitan area is the busiest port in North America handling 15.4 million shipping containers annually. In 2012, the freight cluster moved more than 925 million tons of freight valued at \$1.3 trillion directly into and out of the region, supporting over 176,000 jobs and generating \$12.3 billion in personal income.

FIGURE 3.1 TRANSIT FUNDING PER CAPITA, 2012

Source: Transit agencies in each region, Metropolitan Planning Council



Public transportation ridership in the Chicago metropolitan area has shown disappointing growth over the last several decades because this region invests less on a per capita basis than many international and domestic urban counterparts.

KEEPING PACE WITH HISTORY

The new plan's focus on maintenance and auto alternatives shows how times have changed since the heady days of highway building in the 1950s and '60s. Then, Cook County Board President **Dan Ryan Jr.** was on the vanguard of the nation's massive expressway expansion, sparked by the Eisenhower Administration's Cold War push for an **Interstate Highway System**. Ryan was able to draw on federal funding to breathe life into the 1940 plan, which had called for expressways extending through Chicago and Cook County to distant suburbs and beyond. Today, the focus is on keeping that vast system in good repair by whittling down the maintenance backlog, even while emphasizing greater use of transit and other alternative modes of both personal (bicycling/ride share) and public transportation.

“while autonomous vehicles may be a decade or more away from widespread use, they have the potential to dramatically alter both the demand profile for transportation services and the capacity of transportation systems to meet these needs”

— Connecting Cook County, 2040 Long-Range Transportation Plan

Connecting Cook County now awaits approval by the county board. Once adopted, it will help the county to qualify for more federal transportation funding. And the plan will give the county a framework to seek new strategic partnerships and investments. It will need these, of course, because the \$45 million in reclaimed annual motor fuel tax revenue that is set to come available next year will barely scratch the surface of anticipated needs.

Looking beyond Illinois, the document also may well spur other U.S. population centers behind in their own planning to update their long-range thinking. After all, if Cook County can finally get with the program after three generations, what excuse can they possibly have?