



Infrastructure council applauds Cook County's 25-year transportation plan

Taryn Phaneuf | Aug. 6, 2016

CHICAGO — With the introduction of a long-range transportation plan, Cook County officials have outlined priorities for the county that will impact local decisions, as well as plans across the region.

The 25-year plan, called Connecting Cook County, was introduced to the County Board in July and was scheduled for approval by the Roads and Bridges Committee on Aug. 3. It focuses on how investments in transportation affect business and people. It includes five policy priorities, including focusing on transit and transportation alternatives, supporting the region's role as North America's freight capital, promoting equal access, maintaining and modernizing current infrastructure, and increasing funding.

"Cook County is the second most populous county in the United States and sits at the center of our nation's transportation infrastructure, including its largest freight hub," Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle said in a news release in July. "Our transportation system is one of our region's most important assets — key not only to our economic prosperity but to the well-being of our residents."

Cook County's plan is a good first step, Ben Brockschmidt, executive director of the Illinois Chamber of Commerce Infrastructure Council, told the Cook County Record. He participated in conversations that developed the plan. He said the plan addresses transportation as a system. Moving freight or opening new markets for businesses doesn't really matter if potential workers can't get there. He said the plan references these opportunities, but it's hard to quantify them at this stage.

"Cook County coming up with this, working with a wide range of stakeholders, really shows that it's understanding the big picture," Brockschmidt said.

The big picture also includes the way that Chicago-area projects impact and interact with priorities in other counties. The plan puts Cook County front and center in determining regional transportation policy, according to a news release. By collaborating with other local governments, improvements can have a broader impact.

For that, Preckwinkle deserves praise, Brockschmidt said. By taking a stand now and putting together the first plan in more than 70 years, neighboring counties will have reason to do the same thing.

“People have to know what their local priorities are so as funding becomes available, people can act quickly,” he said.

As always, though, funding remains the big question. Without knowing how state funding for transportation will be, it’s difficult for local governments to plan. Cook County’s priorities include exploring new funding sources.

Last year, local funding increased when the county stopped using motor fuel tax revenue for other purposes.

Brockschmidt said projects will compete for funding, which is why setting priorities is so important.

“We have some really good things going on here,” he said. “The problem is they’re all getting up there in years. They’re all starting to feel their age.”

The problem is that when people think about funding for transportation, they think of “new, shiny” projects, Brockschmidt added.

“The bulk of transportation funding that needs to happen is the regular maintenance and repair,” he said.