

Cook County eyes transportation projects that spur development, jobs

Ted Slowik | August 17, 2016

Riding around the south suburbs in an SUV with John Yonan is a real glass-half-full experience.

Yonan, the Cook County Department of Transportation and Highways superintendent, sees opportunity and potential where others might see urban blight.

I accepted Yonan's invitation to tour parts of the Southland with him to see how the county is strategically investing transportation resources in projects designed to spur economic development and job growth.

Yonan sees the big picture. He's been in this role for nearly five years, wooed to head the county's transportation agency by Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle. He previously served as deputy commissioner and chief engineer of the Chicago Department of Transportation and says U.S. Rep. Robin Kelly, D-Chicago, phoned him twice in 2011 to encourage him to take the job.

Under his leadership, the county last month unveiled "Connecting Cook County," its first long-range transportation plan since 1940.

"'Connecting Cook County' is our guidebook to promote strategic partnerships and investments that strengthen our economy and lead to more livable communities," Preckwinkle said in a release announcing the plan.

On our tour, Yonan showed me examples of what that means. Our first stop was east of Halsted Street in Phoenix, where the county spent about \$1.75 million to rebuild and widen 151st Street to better accommodate truck access to Sterling Lumber Company.



Seeking a bigger voice on transit, freight issues, Cook offers transportation plan
A few years ago, Sterling was considering moving to Indiana. Instead, the maker of crane mats and industrial lumber supplies consolidated operations in Blue Island, Joliet and Gary, Ind., into a new facility in 2013.

In late June, the family-owned business received the 2016 Big Shoes Award from the Chicago Southland Economic Development Corporation. Sterling employs 117 people and reports a five-year growth rate of 569 percent.

The company made a significant private investment, but the public infrastructure surrounding its new facility in Phoenix was lacking.

"Trucks couldn't make this turn. We knew this intersection had to be redesigned," Yonan said, pointing to where the intersection of Halsted and 151st streets was widened to improve safety and accessibility.

The project included drainage and landscaping improvements along 151st, which Yonan called "Main Street Phoenix" since it includes the Village Hall, police and fire departments.



John Yonan, Cook County Department of Transportation and Highways superintendent, describes the county's strategy of investing in projects tied to economic development and job growth. (Ted Slowik / Daily Southtown)

The county also wants to install sidewalks along Halsted Street on the Phoenix-Harvey border to improve pedestrian safety for students at nearby Thornton Township High School, Yonan said.

Next on our tour, Yonan took me to the Canadian National Intermodal Terminal along Center Avenue in Harvey. Supporting the Chicago-area's role as North America's freight capital is a priority of the county's new long-range plan.

Trucks needed better access to the rail yard along arterial roads to and from Interstate 80 at Halsted Street. The interchange is so close to 171st Street, there's little room for trucks to turn onto 171st from the Halsted exit to get to Center Avenue.

The county is nearing completion of a \$10.5 million project to widen and improve Center Avenue between 159th and 171st streets. The county also plans to spend \$5 million to rebuild 167th Street. Trucks are supposed to go north to the state route at 159th Street, but many shave a mile off the trip by using the locally maintained 167th Street instead. "The state has limited opportunity to make the trucks go where they want because they don't have ownership," Yonan said.

Towns like Harvey and Phoenix lack available resources to match state funds for infrastructure improvements, Yonan said. That's why the new transportation plan emphasizes partnerships, especially in the south suburbs.

"It's not about money, it's about leadership," Yonan said.

Another priority identified in the plan is to "promote equal access to opportunities." For the Southland, that means looking at ways to redevelop distressed areas.

"Within Cook County the inequality in access to quality transportation facilities and services and to jobs is pronounced in south Cook and getting worse," the county plan states. By investing in transit facilities, public spaces, bike paths, sidewalks and other quality-of-life projects, the county's goal is to encourage residential and commercial developments.

Another stop on the tour was LB Steel, which employs about 200 people at a manufacturing facility in Harvey. The county plans to improve 156th Street, a roadway so deteriorated it seems like it's never been paved. Improvements also are needed along 155th Street, a Pace bus route used by employees to access LB Steel.

Buses, commuter trains, bicycles and other transit alternatives are another priority identified in the "Connecting Cook County" plan. The county plan supports the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning's goal to double transit ridership by 2040.

"We're looking at things a lot differently now," Yonan said. "We think ahead to a time when people might actually give up driving."

Alsip, Riverdale and South Holland are among other south suburban communities benefiting from a \$20 million county commitment to rebuild deteriorated roads in industrial areas.

"The \$20 million public investment supports businesses that employ 1,170 workers, are investing \$62 million in their facilities, and expect to add 420 new jobs," the plan states.