



Connecting Communities

West Cook County

May 4, 2002

Our Forebearers Set the Stage

Western Cook County's earliest inhabitants were Chippewa, Potawatomi and Ottawa Native Americans who settled along the Des Plaines River. In 1673, the French explorers Louis Joliet and Father Marquette made history with their portage from the Chicago River to the Mississippi River via the Des Plaines and Illinois Rivers. Transportation later became a primary commercial activity.

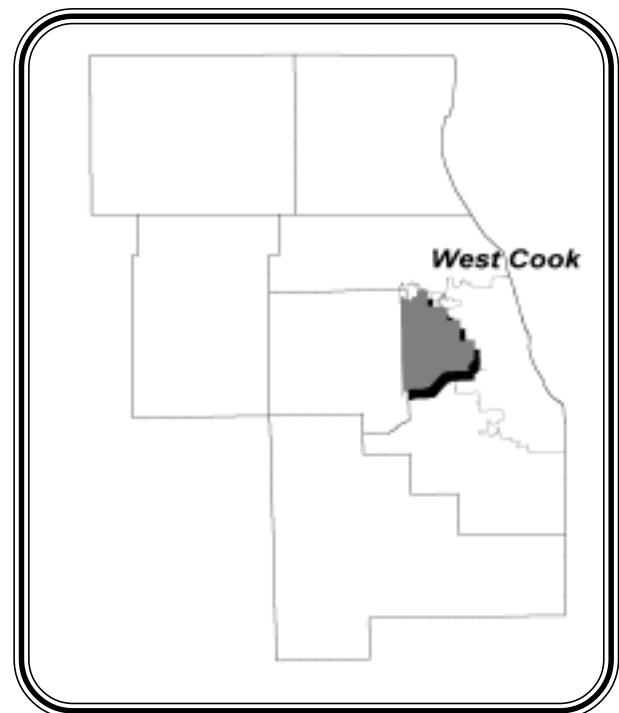
Chicago residents migrated to the communities of West Cook County after the Great Chicago Fire in 1871. The Elevated train was extended to Oak Park in 1895. The Prairie Path was once a successful commuter rail line traversing Chicago, Aurora, and Elgin, though the route closed when Interstate 290 opened. Architecture plays a role in much of the area's history. Frank Lloyd Wright built masterpieces from 1889 until 1913 in Oak Park, Riverside and River Forest. The village of Riverside was designed in 1869 by famous landscape architects Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, the same landscape architects who designed New York's Central Park. In 1970, the entire village of Riverside was designated as a National Historic Landmark.

Nature lovers and recreation seekers enjoy the Illinois Prairie Path, which begins in Maywood and leads to Aurora, Wheaton and beyond. Various paths offer the opportunity to explore hidden natural assets by linking various parks, rivers and communities. Another popular destination is the Brookfield Zoo, which opened its doors in 1934 and has since then achieved international recognition for its conservation and research programs. Cultural icons like Ernest Hemingway and McDonald's founder Ray Kroc have also called the region home.

Today the area pulses with major industrial and job centers located near Schiller Park and Franklin Park, as well as O'Hare International Airport, the Rosemont Convention Center and the Allstate Arena. Cicero is the tenth largest city in Illinois and the seventh fastest growing. Western Cook County is economically and racially diverse.

Who We Are and How We Get Around

We met on a Saturday morning at the Living Word Christian Center, which is in a converted shopping mall in Forest Park. We were brought together by our concerns for safe, accessible travel options that reduce congestion and offer job accessibility. We currently use a variety of modes to travel, with single



occupant cars being the most frequent mode. In succession, our next likely travel choices are: transit, walking, travel in a car with others, and biking. Of the 38 households surveyed at our summit, 31 own cars. Twenty-three of us walk to accomplish errands each week, averaging seven trips per week. Half a dozen of us are wheel chair users.

Almost all of us live near a bus stop and over 80% of us live near a train station. Nearly three-quarters of us benefit from transit service more than twice an hour. Roughly 90% of us took transit in the last month, for an average of 22 transit trips each. About one third of our group report having children under 14

in their household. The children are more likely to be driven to schools than to walk or take a bus, although some families use multiple modes.

Our participants are fairly evenly divided between males (55%) and females (45%). The great majority of attendees (97%) are over 30 years of age. About three-quarters of participants are white, 21% are African American and 5% are Hispanic.

We are united in our desire to have more choices in the way we travel within and beyond our communities. We realize this will require a dramatic shift from the current “auto-centric” culture. We are firm in our belief that “automobile mono-culture,” a term one of us used to describe current priorities, will only get worse unless we take forceful steps to reverse the trend.

Changing the Paradigm

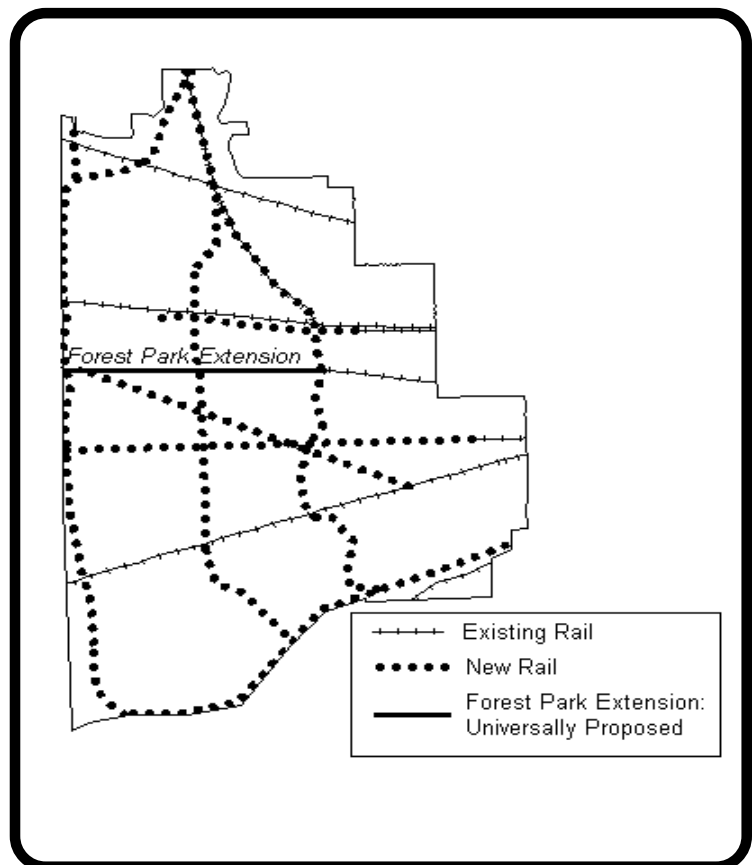
We would begin by implementing a range of marketing and educational initiatives. Drivers need education about bicyclists’ rights if cycling is to be a safe alternative. The appeal of bicycling and walking as transportation choices should be marketed to make them more common and viable forms of getting around. School age children should be educated on alternatives to driving, including the health and environmental impacts of excessive driving. “Drivers’ Education” should be redesigned as “Transportation Education” to include cars, bicycles, pedestrians and transit. High schools should set an example by reducing parking, rather than expanding it. Transit employees need better training to accommodate riders with disabilities efficiently and courteously.

We are very excited by the degree of consensus at our summit, in spite of our diverse backgrounds and interests. We question whether some of the public funds spent on multi-year studies of transportation projects could be saved if we used a community-based planning model. Our summit is evidence that the public does want to be consulted about these decisions. We have a holistic approach to transportation, emphasizing the many small innovations that would improve travel as well as larger projects. We find it noteworthy that with the exception of some road and rail grade separations, no one suggested highway improvements as a solution to our transportation dilemma. Several of us recommend equal subsidies for all transportation options or increases in gas prices to reflect the real costs of driving.

We recognize that consensus, education and common sense can only go so far. The physical world needs to be restructured, as well as our thinking, if we are to succeed in overcoming auto-dependence. We found ourselves in remarkable agreement about the changes we would make to the transportation system in our region.

Rail is the Backbone of Our Region

We would devote significant resources to development of new rail transit and extension of existing lines. Demand for extension of east-west CTA service is universal among us, with the most emphasis on continuing the Forest Park Line along I-290 into DuPage County. Extension of the Cermak Branch and of the Green Line were also seen as viable alternatives. Most of our group also expressed a strong desire for north-south or circumferential service, with a variety of corridors proposed. Among the preferred corridors are: 1) the Inner Circumferential with connections to all existing Metra and CTA lines; 2) a line along I-294 with a major transit hub at the I-290/I-294 junction; 3) new lines north and south from the Forest Park extension, linking O’Hare and Midway; and 4) a circumferen-



tial line in Western Cook County (with stops at both airports) that has Hyde Park and Evanston as its two end points. An extension of the Orange Line along I-55 to I-294 is also proposed. We place less emphasis on Metra expansion. Some new stations are proposed and service increases on the Metra Heritage Line are recommended. CTA service is seen as more flexible than Metra in terms of schedules and ability to reach destinations in Chicago other than the Central Business District. We expect all transit service and stations to accommodate riders with disabilities in the most comprehensive manner possible. We are in clear agreement that expansion of transit options will provide alternatives to congested travel and reduce support for the expansion of I-290 .

In most of our communities the population density is sufficient for transit. We would expand bus service as well as rail, with a great deal more emphasis on flexible services like trolleys that can serve rail stations and accommodate movement within individual communities. Bus service was also recommended to improve north-south access to the airports, with a link to both branches of the Blue Line. While north-south service is perceived as the greatest gap, increased east-west service is also desirable if we are to have a comprehensive transit network.

Better coordination of transit systems and increased frequency of service would make existing transit more efficient. Reliability of service is a problem, particularly for buses that must travel congested roadways. Other amenities, like bus shelters and the return of conductors to CTA trains, would encourage transit use.

Pleasant and accessible train stations, linked to nearby services and stores, are essential to a comprehensive transit network. Participants suggested many possible new rail lines, and offered a great number of potential locations for stations. Recurring ideas included transit hubs and new transit stations along the extended Blue Line (see **Recommendations** for more information).

We see train stations as an attractive way to generate economic development in our communities. Parking lots are necessary to encourage transit use. We would build parking lots at the endpoints of the new extensions.

Pedestrian and Bicycle Choices are Basic

We concur that there is no excuse for failure to build or maintain pleasant, ADA-compliant sidewalks throughout the communities of our region. This minimal investment provides maximum benefit, especially for seniors, the disabled and children. Curb cuts should be installed at every single pedestrian crossing, including temporary curb cuts during construction projects. Access to transit should be improved with comprehensive pedestrian infrastructure linked to stations and stops.

We would like to increase our use of bicycles in our communities, on paths along the waterways and on designated lanes on roadways (not shared lanes). Many of us wish to access transit by bicycle. Bike racks at transit stations and bike-friendly policies on transit should be the norm, not the exception.

We are aware of the environmental and public health benefits of encouraging more biking and walking, and wonder why the planning community seems to dismiss individual and regional health. Our region should strive to reduce the pollution, and the respiratory diseases, caused by excessive driving and congestion. We could do a much better job of preserving precious open space and healthy wildlife habitat by providing more options for biking and walking. We could reduce damage to local and regional waterways by reducing polluted runoff from roadways. We could do all these things for less cost than what we spend now for roads, which immediately become gridlocked with new traffic.

Our Vision

We look forward to a day when well-planned transit stations are an economic asset to our communities, encouraging growth in existing areas. Walkable neighborhoods are highly desirable, improve quality of life, and provide the best value for the expenditure of public tax dollars. Greater public involvement in transportation planning will result in a shift of resources away from the automobile dependent culture that limits our choices to a more robust menu of options for travel. We would like to do many more of our trips locally and need a better mix of local amenities reachable by pedestrian, bike and transit modes. With greater transportation alternatives, our region will begin to improve air and water quality and make efficient use of existing infrastructure by reusing and rebuilding areas that have deteriorated.

Recommendations

Significantly Increase Rail Transit Interconnectivity. Reduce highway congestion and preserve communities by increasing rail transit options. Widening I-290 will merely cause more congested travel, more emissions and more destruction of community assets. Cancel plans to widen the Eisenhower, and extend the Forest Park Line Forest Park branch of the Blue Line to Oak Brook instead. Build north-south or circumferential service in West Cook County. Extensions of the Cermak branch of the Blue Line, the Orange Line along I-55, and the Green Line to Mannheim Road should also be considered as a means of maximizing transit connectivity throughout Chicagoland and to its airports. Use existing freight rail lines or right-of-way along the I-294 corridor for north-south rail service.

Build new transit hubs (superstations) at the junction of I-290/I-294 and at Mannheim Road. Provide ADA accessible train stations at other points on the new lines, including Bellwood, Maywood, Oak Brook, Broadview, Melrose Park, Franklin Park, Justice, LaGrange, McCook, Northlake, and Summit; build the Blue Line stations first. Refurbish older stations to bring all into ADA compliance.

Improve Access and Coordination of Transit. Increase the use of rail transit by improving access and linkages. Ensure that the areas around all transit stations and bus stops are safe, pedestrian friendly, and accessible by bicycle. Increase bus service on north-south and east-west routes, to provide a comprehensive grid of service. Increase paratransit options and link to mainline service wherever possible. Institute trolley or other flexible service within communities to facilitate easy access to shops, services and rail stations. Replace existing buses with high-efficiency, clean energy models.

Provide parking lots for commuter use at Oak Brook and Hillside. Coordinate land use around stations to create transit oriented development. Improve transit amenities to be safe, quiet and comfortable. Transit could be improved through making stations ADA accessible, ticket sales at all stops, rider surveys to determine public needs, conductors on all trains and frequency improvements. Coordinate scheduling and signage between the three service providers to increase transit usage.

Provide More Options for Walking and Cycling. Stop strangling our communities with cars and substantially increase public investment in sidewalk improvements and bikeways. The modest investment required will pay immediate and long-term dividends, in contrast to road construction projects that create new congestion. Immediately retrofit all curbs that are without curb cuts to ADA standards. Create pedestrian overpasses over I-290. Improve or build bikeways along the Des Plaines River and the creek systems in our communities. Create more access points to parks and forest preserves. Provide safe, separated bikeways along expressway corridors and provide marked lanes along arterials like Ogden Avenue and North Avenue. Build overpasses for the Prairie Path over the Blue Line and the Maywood Court House. Bus shelters should also be made accessible to cyclists by providing protected bicycle parking.

Planners Must Heed the Public's Will

Our enthusiastic and informed participation in transportation planning proves that the public is ready, willing and able to offer sensible advice, combined with visionary thinking. We propose practical changes such as grade separations at several sites, especially along Harlem Avenue, 1st Avenue and Lake Street, to relieve road and rail conflicts since increasing freight traffic and High Speed Passenger Rail will mean more trains running through our communities. We propose visionary ideas like better use of the waterways, with commuter boats along the canal and river system offering an alternative to congested highway travel. If we begin to plan today according to the public's wishes, we will recoup immense savings by focusing on comprehensive but inexpensive infrastructure for walkers and cyclists and investing the savings in the more expensive transit investments that are needed.

The West Cook County *Connecting Communities* summit participants came as individuals and as members of groups. Some of the groups that helped plan the summit include:

Faith in Place
Progress Center for Independent Living

Connecting Communities Regional Partners

Business and Professional People for the Public Interest
Chicago Design Consortium
Chicago Metropolis 2020
Chicago Rehab Network
Chicagoland Bicycle Federation
Citizen Action-Illinois
Council for Disability Rights
Environmental Law and Policy and Policy Center of the Midwest
Faith in Place

Friends of the Chicago River
Independent Voters of Illinois-Independent Precinct Organization
League of Women Voters of Illinois
Metro Seniors in Action
Metropolitan Planning Council
Mid America Institute on Poverty
Sierra Club
Sustain



The Citizen Transportation Plan is a project of the Chicagoland Transportation and Air Quality Commission, part of the Center for Neighborhood Technology, 2125 W. North Ave., Chicago, IL 60647, 773-278-4800, ext. 2030. Visit us on the web at www.cnt.org/2030.