

Connecting Communities

Southwest Metro Region

February 28, 2002

Community Assets

The Southwest Metro Region was shaped by railroads and waterways. Irish, German and Scandinavian immigrants were the first laborers to aid in the creation of the Illinois & Michigan (I & M) Canal in 1836. This shipping canal was at one time the most significant trading waterway in the United States. The I&M Canal strengthened the agricultural industry, offered numerous options for capturing waterpower, moved passenger traffic and also served as a major trading route to introduce the products of the East to the Midwest and points beyond. The Canal laid the foundation for Chicago to become a transportation hub. In 1984 the Canal corridor became the first “National Heritage Corridor.”

Illinois’ agricultural industry has flourished because of rich and fertile land like that in the Southwest Metro Region. The area’s proximity to local markets, industrial and consumer, creates economic efficiencies for the region. Local corn was sold as fodder to the stockyards in Chicago and today food grade products such as corn flour, syrup and meal are locally refined and then sold to businesses for further production of items like cereals and candies. Other natural resources have also been “harvested” by industry. Quarry companies have excavated valuable natural resources such as limestone, coal and sand, much of which is used in the region.

Today the area is home to a predominately white community with pockets of African-American, Hispanic, Asian and other ethnic groups, as well as a substantial new-immigrant population. Areas such as Lemont, Joliet and Romeoville keep the history of the region and the I & M Canal alive with visitor centers, museums and special events.



What remains of the Canal can be explored by bike or foot on a trail system and in small parks dotting the area. The natural history and beauty of the area can be experienced in the Palos Forest Preserves, where glaciers formed hills, lakes, ponds and the Sag Valley.

Who We Are and How We Get Around

We gathered at the Main campus of Joliet Junior College to cooperate on a new vision of transportation and land use planning for our part of the Chicago region. We shared a sense of urgency about transportation planning, fueled by the lack of travel options in our communities. Although as a group we are committed to multi-modal travel, we find ourselves restricted to cars for almost all of our trips. Over 40% of us have no bus or train transit within a mile of our homes. Among those who have accessible transit service, only 9% have service more than twice an hour. Consequently we took only 1.7 transit trips last month, on average.

Our ability to walk in our communities is also inadequate. None of our children walk to school, although walking is an activity we rank highly. Even though our transit use is very modest, we are more able to take transit than to walk to do errands. The rural character of some communities impacts “walkability,” but even many built-up areas are deficient in safe pedestrian routes. In fact, our greatest concern is safety, not only for pedestrians who are most vulnerable, but for all modes of travel. The top two ways we would improve transportation in our region are to improve transit and to improve pedestrian access.

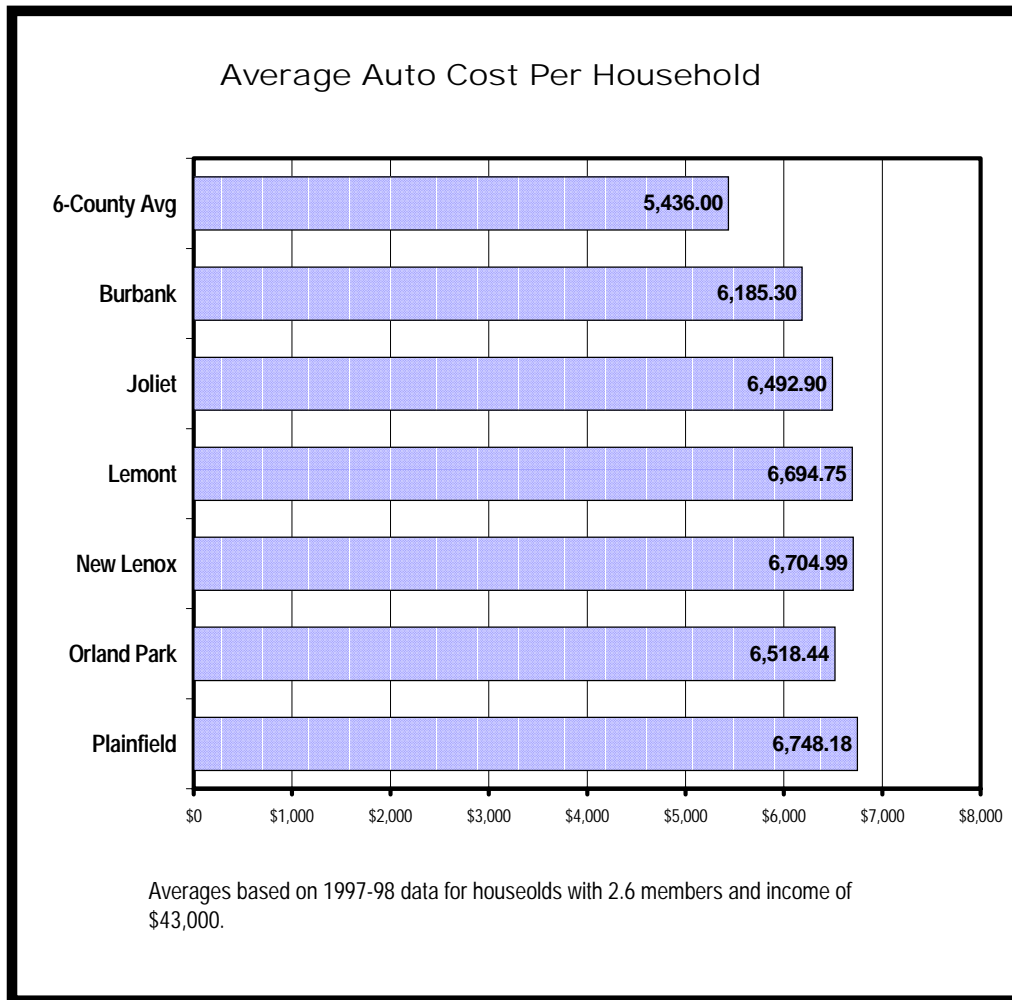
Our summit was fairly evenly divided between males and females, but slightly older than the general public. Of the survey respondents who indicated their racial background, 85% were white, slightly higher than the county as a whole. There was diverse representation from the disabled community, including participants who were visually impaired, hearing impaired (sign-language interpretation was accommodated) and wheelchair users.

Challenges and Solutions

Transit service is infrequent or unavailable.

The larger cities in our area are frequent destinations and we need options other than cars to reach them. We see two potential transit hubs, in Joliet and Orland Park, with local service radiating out from each hub. Increased bus service to high-traffic destinations like the Louis Joliet Mall would alleviate some congestion. Our train service to Chicago is sparse. We would like to have more frequent service, including weekend service, on the existing lines. In addition, we would like to investigate other public transit modes, including trains along the expressway corridors, commuter boats on local waterways and commuter service on the Elgin, Joliet and Eastern rail line.

Transit-oriented development is an economic asset to our region, as well as a means of getting around more efficiently. Our region has suffered from a lack of properly planned transit stations that attract a mix of nearby housing, jobs and services, increasing economic efficiency. Instead we spend many hours and more money than the regional average to complete our daily tasks.



We would like to work with our village and town authorities to help support Pace and the RTA. Planners and development commissions should hold town meetings to get public input on transit issues so they would understand how much unmet demand there is for transit. This includes the demand for more standard service, more accessible service and for better paratransit. Most of us are unable to use transit regularly. Some of us, including children, seniors and the disabled, find the lack of transit to be a formidable barrier to accessing basic amenities such as health care, shops and services and recreation sites.

Many of us find it difficult to get around.

The investment needed to provide basic sidewalk infrastructure is minimal compared to the cost of new roads. We should have sidewalks in all areas of the region that are not rural. This is a basic necessity for some in our population, including seniors, the disabled and children. Depriving them of the right to move freely is detrimental to the vitality of the region. In addition, the availability of sidewalks is directly related to the success of transit and of transit-oriented development. Safety is our highest concern about our own communities. The lack of sidewalks and safe crosswalks is a critical issue for us.

Similarly, bicycle infrastructure is inexpensive, especially if it is incorporated into existing road projects. Soft shoulders should be paved for use by cyclists. This would add very little cost if done during road construction or repair. The paint to stripe exclusive bike lanes is also very inexpensive. Provide connectivity between existing and planned trails. Sidewalks and trails should be a vital part of the transportation network and provide access to transit and other modes. Recreation trails in our region should also be expanded, including the Old Plank Trail, the trails along the Des Plaines River and in the Forest Preserve Districts.

Clustered economic development and a healthy environment are linked.

If we cluster homes, businesses and services near to each other and provide ample transit, pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure we can reap economic benefits, improve human health and efficiency *and* improve the natural environment. Money and time spent in traffic can be put to more efficient uses. Clustering development and keeping it near existing development helps preserve the valuable farmland, wetlands, watersheds and rolling forests that make our part of the region unique. Incremental planning that provides transit without pedestrian access, or provides sidewalks without destinations, or attempts to preserve open space without containing sprawl will not work. Our planning officials need to take a comprehensive approach to weaving all these approaches together to preserve our natural environment *and* promote economic development.

Our roads and bridges are inadequate.

Roads will form the backbone of our local travel for the foreseeable future. We believe that expanding the capacity of or making more efficient use of existing roads is a better policy than building new roads. We support express lanes for car pools, van pools and buses. We also believe that intersection improvements such as turning lanes would ease some congestion problems without consuming huge tracts of valuable land for new roads. Bridges are a particular problem in our area. We need additional bridges across the Des Plaines River to facilitate inter-regional travel.

Our Vision

We visualize a region where the public is involved in both local and regional planning. Ideally, there would be a synergy between a local mix of housing, jobs and services. Transit would benefit from this synergy and also contribute to economic development opportunities clustered around transit stations. In the future our neighborhoods should be walkable. We want travel choices that do not impact air or water quality in our communities. The benefits and burdens of transportation should be shared across the region, with a strong priority given to maintaining infrastructure that the taxpayers have already paid for. If we were managing long range planning, we would preserve agricultural land and open space and rebuild public infrastructure in communities that have experienced deteriorating conditions.

Recommendations

Substantially increase transit options. Increase frequency and hours of service on existing bus routes, especially in the Joliet area. Ensure that all transit meets or exceeds ADA requirements. Increase bus options for inter-regional travel between Joliet and Orland Park, Bolingbrook, Plainfield, Naperville, Lockport, New Lenox (and to points in between) and to locations like Joliet Junior College (Route 53 campus) and the Louis Joliet Mall. A second regional bus hub should be created in the Orland Park area, with bus service radiating out to Frankfort, Joliet, Lockport and Midlothian. Shuttle buses or trolleys should supplement main line service, especially around malls, casinos and between lower-density communities.

Recommendations - Increase transit (continued)

Coordination of bus and train schedules needs improvement. Train schedules should be drastically increased on existing lines, including more weekday trains and weekend trains. New rail stations should be built at Elwood, Laraway Road, Lockport, Manhattan, Minooka, New Lenox, Romeoville and Shorewood. Park-and-ride lots should be built at these new or existing stations: Homer Glen, Lemont, Lockport, Manhattan, Minooka, New Lenox, Shorewood. New transit options include electric train transit along I-55 and I-294, a new line between Minooka, Shorewood and Joliet, and passenger service on the Elgin, Joliet and Eastern line.

Expand options for pedestrians, bicyclists, seniors, the disabled and children. Install sidewalks all over our region, especially in Crest Hill, Frankfort, Homer Glen, Joliet, Lockport, Mokena, New Lenox, Orland Park and Plainfield. Ensure that sidewalks and crosswalks are safe and accessible for children, the disabled and seniors. Improve traffic enforcement as well as infrastructure to ensure the mobility and safety of seniors, children and the disabled. Enforce handicapped parking zones. Create a comprehensive network of bicycle routes throughout the region; pave shoulders on all rural roads, expand off-road trails and stripe bike lanes in urban areas. Provide bike parking and other amenities at transit stations. Allow bikes on Metra trains.

Develop with sensitivity to the environment. The important agricultural and water assets of this region can best be preserved by clustering development near existing communities. Local and regional planning should emphasize preservation of open space, creeks and shallow aquifers. Create a connected network of open space, especially between greenways and forest preserves. Land use and transportation planning should be coordinated so that properly planned transit stations become an economic asset. Mix commercial, retail and residential uses and provide multiple modes of travel between uses. Encourage residential development that uses predictable connections to facilitate pedestrian and transit travel.

Redesign, repair and retrofit our roads and bridges. Existing roads could better accommodate traffic if they were used more efficiently. Widen existing roads rather than build the I-355 extension. Both I-294 and I-55 would benefit from express lanes for car pools, shuttle buses and van pools. Intersection improvements would facilitate the free flow of traffic, especially on three major arterials: US-45 intersections with 143rd, 151st, 159th and 179th Streets; 159th Street intersections with Cicero, Wolf, Bell and State; and 195th at LaGrange Road. Widen 159th Street. Ramps should be improved at Weber Road and I-55, the I-355/I-55 intersection, and US-30 and I-80. Bridges are needed in Lemont, in Fairmont and at Division Street in Lockport. Grade separations at congested locations like Cedar Road and Route 30 (at the juncture with the Rock Island Line) would significantly increase traffic efficiency. Re-engineer the 9th Street bridge in Lockport to resolve safety and visibility issues at the railroad crossing.

The Southwest Metro Region Connecting Communities summit participants came as individuals and as members of groups. The people who helped plan the summit came from the following groups:

Human Action Community Organization (HACO)
Institute for Public Policy and Administration, Governor's State University
Lincolnway South Corridor Against the Tollway (LSCAT)

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 Center of the Midwest
Friends of the Chicago River

Independent Voters of Illinois-Independent Precinct
Organization
Interreligious Sustainability Project
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.