



Connecting Communities

McHenry County

September 19, 2001

A Picture of McHenry County Today

Rolling farmland, Victorian towns, new sub-divisions and corporate facilities. Images of McHenry County include all these and more. Lake in the Hills grew 300% in the last decade and is building homes, schools, roads, and stores at a very rapid rate. The county seat, Woodstock, is a picture perfect Victorian town, complete with a gazebo in the town square, an opera house, and a turn-of-the-century jail converted into a restaurant. Motorola located a major division in Harvard, in the northwest corner of the county in 1994. Del Webb Corporation recently completed a development in Huntley catering to older adults, the first of its kind in a northern state.

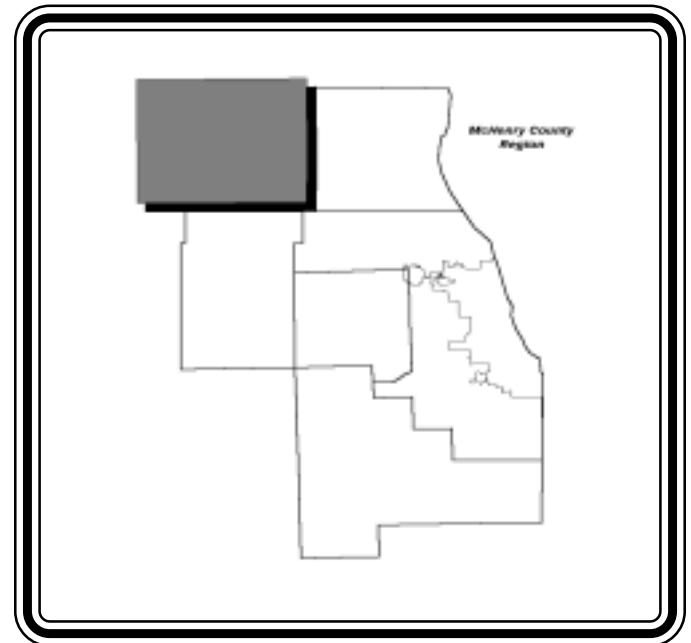
McHenry County is the fastest growing county in the metropolitan region and the least populated, at 260,000 residents. In spite of rapid commercial and residential development recently, the primary use of land in McHenry County is still agricultural. Agricultural land is 62% of total land and contributed \$110 million to McHenry County's economy in 1997. Other significant natural assets include oak savannas and prairies, and high quality streams like the Kishwaukee River. Preservation of agricultural land and open space is a prime value in McHenry County. The town of Woodstock has rezoned land to return it to agricultural rather than residential zoning. A successful open space referendum in the spring of 2001 for the McHenry County Conservation District resulted in \$68.5 million in new bonding capacity to acquire open space.

Who We Are

We came from towns like Cary, McHenry, Crystal Lake, Marengo, and the rural areas around these towns, and we met in Woodstock. Many of us are members of the McHenry County Defenders, the environmental organization that co-sponsored the Connecting Communities Summit. Some of us were advocates for economic justice or representatives of disabled populations. Others came from civic organizations, state, municipal or county offices, and local religious or educational institutions. There were more females than

males at our summit (64% vs. 36%), and our group was predominantly white, as is McHenry County.

We place a high value on conserving the land around us and on our friendly, small-town way of life. We are fearful that too much development, or poorly planned development, threatens the quality of life that we value so highly. We place a very high value on having choices about how to get around, but we are severely limited in our ability to make trips that don't involve cars by a lack of sidewalks, bike routes and transit.



Health is an important consideration for us too. That includes human health and environmental health. We value walkable neighborhoods and want more opportunities to walk and cycle. Congestion is not as critical an issue for most of us as it is to others in the metropolitan area, but we fear that excessive auto traffic will degrade our quality of life if we don't have a balance of options in the future. Safety of movement is very important to us.

We gathered eight days after the horrific attack on the World Trade Towers in New York, determined to plan for the future, less sure than we had been of what the future is likely to hold for us. We were more aware of our vulnerability and of our interconnectedness. Our concerns about dependence on private vehicles and on foreign oil are not platitudes but real sources of disquiet. We would like to have more options for travel within and beyond our own area.

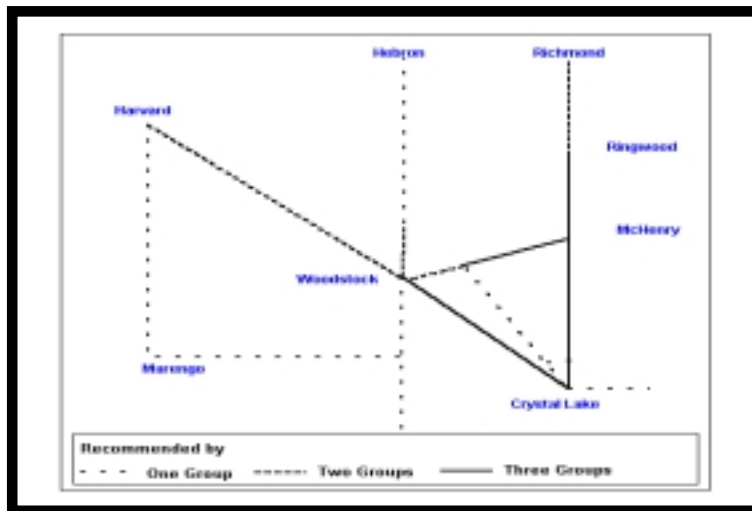
We find ourselves distressingly limited to automobile travel at this point in time. Sixty-two percent of us are more than one mile from transit; in order to access transit we must use our cars. Forty percent of us used transit in the last month. Virtually all of our households (average household size 2.3 people) have two cars. But our top priorities for improving travel are: 1) transit; 2) pedestrian access; 3) environmental protection; and 4) bicycle access. We want choices!

Challenges and Solutions

Too Many Trips Must Start and End in a Car

Even for those of us who use Metra trains or ride bikes frequently, we usually must drive to a train station or bike path to begin our trip. Bus service is very sparse. There are only three bus routes in all of McHenry County and they have minimal weekday, rush hour service. Our county needs a system of shuttle buses that move between the communities and to the train stations. While the population of our county is the lowest in the region, over half of our population resides in just six towns: Algonquin, Cary, Crystal Lake, Lake in the Hills, McHenry, and Woodstock.

The recommendations of our groups were heavily weighted toward shuttle buses and trolleys in various configurations. Three groups made roughly similar route recommendations (see map). One recommendation was for shuttles radiating out from Woodstock to other major towns in all directions. Another recommendation was for three “hubs” in McHenry, Woodstock and Crystal Lake, with service between all three and feeder service into the hubs. Major institutions like McHenry County College, the County Court House and two local hospitals were also seen as needing shuttle service.



Better transit access to Lake County is particularly important, since many of us have jobs there that we cannot reach except by driving. The counties neighboring McHenry need better connections to each other, especially to their central employment locations.

We felt that bicycling could be a more useful mode of travel with just minor modifications to the existing roadways. Paving a bike lane along roads in the county would create a safe and smooth riding surface. The existing gravel shoulders do not allow us to start or end our bike trips on local roads. To be safe, we must drive our cars to paths that are often more recreational in purpose than functional. We believe that bicycling is a legitimate mode for practical trips to work, to transit, to school and to stores. Providing the five to eight feet necessary for bike lanes on the shoulder of the road is inexpensive relative to the price of adding full lanes and helps protect our air quality.

An innovative way to integrate our travel modes would be to provide park-and-rides that would allow drivers to aggregate and car pool, and also offer “Bike Station” facilities to encourage some commuters to bike to their car pool site rather than drive.

Train Service Is Good; More Would Be Better

Train service is very limited; more convenient service is necessary to increase usage. Better linkage between train service and bus service would also promote use. Central McHenry County is an hour and a half from the Loop; more express trains would be welcome. A link between existing train lines from the town of McHenry and Jefferson Park would increase access to O’Hare International Airport and the Northwest side of Chicago.

We would like to see freight lines used for additional commuter rail, including expanded service from Rockford to Chicago and Richmond to Fox Lake. We would be well served by improvements to the line from Southern Wisconsin and Richmond in order to access Chicago. A line between Crystal Lake, McHenry, and Ringwood should also be initiated to accomodate inter-suburban

travel. Better train accessibility between McHenry county and Lake and Kane counties is also important to us. While we are very supportive of new rail, we are also wary about the possibility that rail lines can cause sprawling development. Parking at Metra stations is sometimes a problem, and we feel that it could be improved by making the rules more flexible on parking in “reserved” spaces. We caution that development near rail should take advantage of its natural assets by encouraging walkable, transit-oriented and mixed-use development.

Sprawl Threatens Our Way of Life

There is a growing tendency in McHenry County to promote sprawl, or low-density development. This trend will make transit service even harder to provide in the future than it is today. In addition, sprawl encroaches on the habitats of threatened and endangered species. Fragile wetlands like Lake in the Hills Fen, Alden Sedge Meadows, and Exner Marsh and high quality streams like the Kishwaukee River and Nippersink Creek are threatened by sprawl development. Valuable farmland needs to be protected; farm vehicles already have a tough time co-existing with fast-moving vehicles. Low-density development is also unlikely to be affordable to many people who work in McHenry County. If we want to avoid gridlock, we have to create “live where you work” communities for a wide range of income groups. We should apply the principles of compact, mixed-use development and educate people about its value. Building more compact communities will help to keep taxes lower for everyone by reducing the amount of investment in roads, school buses and other essential services.

Proper stewardship of the environment requires good planning. This is equally true for air quality, water quality, wildlife and open space. We should reach consensus on how to use our land before building new transportation projects. We should use the infrastructure we already have in ways that require less car travel to preserve our environment and save money.

Better regional planning would reduce municipal competition for development and benefit everyone. In order to preserve open space and agriculture we should limit growth in the western part of the county.

The Market Plays a Role Too

We welcome the jobs brought by new corporate neighbors, but caution that we encourage them to be good neighbors. Employers who choose inaccessible locations should be required to provide shuttle services for their employees so that the existing roads are not

clogged. We don't want to lose more farmland to road building. We encourage businesses to take active steps to promote workforce housing near their jobs, utilizing newly enacted legislation with such incentives. We believe that incentives should be offered to developers who build transit-oriented developments.

If cars were taxed by environmental impact, fewer people would waste non-renewable resources and we could decrease our dependence on foreign oil. Higher taxes on gasoline would also encourage people to drive less. “Hybrid cars” should be more affordable.

Safe and Healthy Alternatives Should Be Offered

Many of us wanted explore safe crossing alternatives to crosswalks at dangerous intersections. In addition to the risks of injury posed by heavy auto traffic, we are concerned with the deteriorating health and physical activity of our youngsters. We recommend building many more sidewalks in all the populated parts of the county, but especially around train stations, commercial districts and schools.

Bicycle trips to accomplish practical as well as recreational purposes should be encouraged. Bike trails and lanes should be created that connect neighborhoods and towns to commerce centers, other neighborhoods, and cities. Existing and planned bike paths like the Prairie Trail and the Huntley-Union-Marengo Trail should be expanded and linked. Bikeways should link to Conservation District sites.

Our Vision and Values

We envision a McHenry County that values and preserves its agricultural land, natural resources, and open space, especially by preserving land to the west of Route 47. Good planning is an important component to managing future growth. Our definition of good planning includes a priority on air and water quality. The public should be engaged, together with elected leaders, on planning for the future. Communities should plan together rather than compete with each other for development. We envision a place where there is a balance of jobs and housing in proximity to each other and to transit. In an ideal future, many more trips will start on foot because our communities will be pleasant and safe places to walk. Townspeople will have a variety of options for efficient and healthful travel and children will play and travel in safe communities. We will have a range of transportation choices rather than being restricted to automobile travel for most everything we do.

Recommendations

Preserve our agricultural heritage and our invaluable open space.

Aggressive steps need to be taken by county and state officials to protect farms from encroachment by roads and subdivisions. The Kane County 2020 plan should be a model for McHenry County. Growth west of Route 47 should be limited to preserve farming. Wetlands, high quality streams, and forested areas are irreplaceable assets that must be protected. More funds should be set aside to purchase and preserve open space.

Coordinate transportation planning with business, education and regional leaders.

Good land use planning should include and be integrated with a viable transportation plan. Land use planning should emphasize preservation of the cultural and historical value of each community. Transit-oriented development principles should be applied at train stations and bus nodes in order to spur local economic activity. Schools should be accessible on foot and by bicycle. Local employers need to be involved in creating affordable housing opportunities locally and in promoting auto-alternative travel. Road improvements are needed too, but it is better to improve existing roads than to build new ones. Implementation of the Strategic Regional Arterials plan (for roads such as US Routes 14 and 20, and State Highways 47, 173, 176, 120) should be fast-tracked, and should include three lane roads with turning lanes as an alternative to four lane roads.

Use innovative shuttle service to connect McHenry County communities to job centers and train stations.

We visualize our major communities as having a triangular relationship to each other and would like shuttle service to connect communities and rail stations in that orientation. The primary nodes of the triangle are Crystal Lake, McHenry and Woodstock. We propose a system using trolleys, shuttles and/or vans to provide frequent service around the triangle and to points radiating out to Harvard and Marengo at minimum. Job sites, the hospitals, the college, and the court house are other essential destinations that must be served by transit.

Expand and coordinate rail service.

Suburb-to-suburb travel could be enhanced by expanded train service on the line from Fox Lake to Richmond, and from Rockford to Chicago. More frequent service on existing lines would encourage greater use. Express trains should be offered from Crystal Lake to the Loop. The Jefferson Park Blue Line stop and the Metra stop at Jefferson Park need to be linked for ease of access to the Northwest side of Chicago and to O'Hare. A system of park-and-ride lots with Bike Stations should serve as a "feeder" system to get more commuters to train stations (as well as other destinations) without consuming so much in-town land for parking lots at the stations.

A comprehensive network of sidewalks and bicycle routes is essential and fiscally responsible.

Encouraging walking and biking requires very minimal investment in sidewalks and bike routes - an economical approach compared to new road lanes. All towns, malls and residential developments should have abundant sidewalks. Developers should be required to build sidewalks and bike routes into all new developments. Local roads should be retrofitted with bike lanes for exclusive bicycle travel. Bicycle travel for practical as well as recreational purposes must be accommodated. Roads that have become uncrossable by pedestrians need to use a range of available strategies to allow pedestrians safe passage.

The McHenry County *Connecting Communities* staff is especially grateful to the

McHenry County Defenders

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***Connecting Communities* Regional Partners**

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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.