



Connecting Communities

Calumet Region Caucus

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A Chicagoland Transportation and Air Quality Commission project in partnership with: Human Action Community Organization • Shut This Airport Nightmare Down • The Village of Park Forest • South Suburban COPE



The Calumet Region was the site of the first *Connecting Communities* summit in April 2001. Two years later, a group of concerned citizens, about one half of whom participated in the first summit, reconvened as a *Connecting Communities* caucus to discuss the status of their recommendations made during the 2001 summit. While this group had positive comments, many felt that not enough has been done to improve surface transportation in their area. There was deep concern that land use and transportation planning has not been done with the people of the community in mind.

In particular, there was a special concern that current planning practices encourage sprawl by accommodating an airport that has yet to be built and is unpopular with members of this community. This group was representative of a much larger constituency opposed to the airport. When the Chicago Area Transportation Study (CATS) provided a draft long-range plan for public review in April and May 2003, CNT analyzed all 585 public comments regarding surface transportation projects. Based on this analysis, approximately one third of comments received regarding all projects for northeastern Illinois were in opposition to the planned airport.

Expand Commuter Rail

There was a great deal of support for the development of commuter rail lines that serve all parts of this region. A rail line that ran south from Chicago between the Bishop Ford Freeway and the Indiana border would be a viable alternative to driving in communities that currently do not have service. Participants wanted more Metra and Pace coordination to ensure that residents have integrated transit services. They also identified the need for planning more compact land uses; stations should be built close to residences.

Expand Pace Service

Calumet residents reported a lack of improvement in transit service; in some cases service has been

Connecting Communities Caucuses are a public involvement follow-up to the *Connecting Communities* Summits that involved over 500 people from throughout northeastern Illinois. The caucuses are designed to take a "snapshot" of a community's views on progress toward their summit recommendations. Some recommendations were major projects that could only be accomplished over a long time period. Others were practical, short term, and inexpensive solutions to community mobility deficits.

Excerpt from Calumet Region *Connecting Communities*, April 2001:

"From the post-war bedroom communities and industrial towns bordering Chicago on the north to productive farmland in its far southern reaches, the South Suburbs of Chicago are a study in contrasts. Spanning parts of two counties, southern Cook and Eastern Will, the Calumet region was once the industrial powerhouse of the Chicago metropolitan area. In the early 20th Century heavy industry found the Calumet region well suited for easy access to markets throughout the Midwest and on both coasts. Over the last decade of the 20th Century, the Calumet Region has continued to undergo change, with a continued influx of blacks and Hispanics seeking the American dream of a single-family home on a larger lot. Residential development continues to take place on the fringes of the region, with new housing developments being built in Richton Park, Country Club Hills and Park Forest. The Calumet region also struggles to cope with economic decline in older portions of the region as new investment occurs in undeveloped agricultural areas to the south and west and in Indiana."

threatened or reduced, such as the reduction of the Jolly Trolley¹ service for senior citizens in Park Forest. Participants expressed consensus that east-west connections remain a priority. Likewise, improved Pace connections to Metra and more express bus service to downtown Chicago would enhance transit options.

Revitalize Downtowns with Transit

There was great concern that the south and southeast parts of the region are neglected in terms of development. Parking lots near Metra stations were viewed as possible sites for redevelopment. The caucus felt very strongly that planners and developers ignore their part of the region when making land use

¹ The Jolly Trolley is not a Pace service, but a municipally funded service.

decisions. When developers do come into the area, the community is not included in development planning. Participants would like to see parking reduced at Metra stations and the space used instead for new retail and other development. An incentive for giving up the opportunity to park would be that Metra riders who had monthly passes would be given unlimited Pace rides funded by the Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality Improvement Program (CMAQ). Others suggested that the developments near transit nodes should capitalize on their prime location and advertise on Metra and Pace to attract clientele, thereby bolstering their business.

Improve Access to Transit Service Information

People thought that addressing this concern would be simple - just do it. Many felt that it was just an issue of Metra and Pace distributing more information to municipalities and local communities, where schedules and maps could be easily posted and distributed. While this is more a local issue than a regional issue, all parts of the region could follow such an example. Additionally, several participants want transit to be better marketed and more appealing.

Redevelop Brownfields

There has been little improvement in brownfield redevelopment. It was noted that while there has been an Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) grant for assessments and clean-up there were still outstanding issues. The caucus also identified a need for expansion of funding for clean up and more consideration for redeveloping brownfields especially those served by existing rail and other infrastructure. One suggestion was to prevent future brownfields by requiring industries to clean up their sites before they vacate. In order to compel the industries in this area to clean up, the EPA should be authorized to fine industries that failed to clean up sites.

Expand Walking and Bike Trails

Accommodation for bicycles was an area of improvement. Pace buses have been outfitted with bike racks. The Old Plank Trail was improved. Participants believed that more attractive and recreational bicycling facilities would help people see bikes as transportation and not just recreation, ultimately increasing use. There was some variation in opinion on how adequate sidewalks were in this region. Some thought that sidewalks were good in residential areas but poor on arterials, while others said sidewalk networks were completely absent in their area. They identified a need for more

coordination between transit agencies and municipalities on sidewalk improvements. Some transit stations had been renovated to comply with ADA standards, but the property surrounding the stations had not been renovated to accommodate wheelchairs and other mobility devices.

No one who attended the Calumet Region caucus expected major infrastructure changes to have occurred since the April 2001 *Connecting Communities* Summit. They acknowledged and appreciated the improvement in bicycling opportunities, but were disappointed in the lack of progress toward improved transportation options and regression in overall transit service.

Because this part of the region, more than any other, struggles with the impacts of economic disinvestment, there is a sense of urgency about maximizing the potential benefits from transportation infrastructure. These Calumet area stakeholders advocated for investments in transit-oriented development and brownfield redevelopment, rather than an airport on the fringes of the region, as the way to remedy a lack of local jobs, long commutes, and struggling town centers.



The Calumet Region Caucus was held at the Park Forest Village Hall, one successful example of how to convert abandoned commercial space for community use.



Participants read over the summit report for their region and discussed progress toward meeting their original recommendations.

The Chicagoland Transportation and Air Quality Commission is a coalition of non-profit organizations from this region that bring federal transportation mandates to local actors. CTAQC keeps its constituents and members informed about transportation, land use, environmental justice, and other related issues.

Chicagoland Transportation and Air Quality Commission • 2125 W North Avenue • Chicago, IL 60647 • (773) 278-4800 • www.cnt.org/tsp