

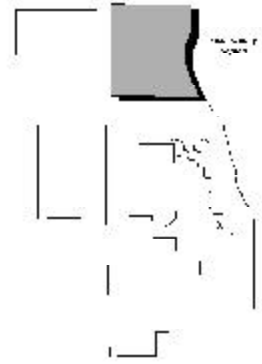


Connecting Communities

Lake County Caucus

October 29, 2003

A Chicagoland Transportation and Air Quality Commission project in partnership with:
League of Women Voters of Lake County and Lake County Conservation Alliance



Two years ago, Lake County residents gathered at a *Connecting Communities* summit to develop recommendations about transportation, development, and land use. Many of the same residents (and a few new participants) met to assess progress on their recommendations; the group reported substantial progress in areas like open space preservation, construction of bicycling facilities, and “the county moving into the future” by deploying systems like ITS.¹ These actions by county, forest preserve and local officials met with widespread approval from the assembled group.

Other recommended improvements were perceived to have been stalled by a lack of intergovernmental agreements, incentives, and cooperation. “Rampant annexation” by municipalities seeking rapid growth has posed a threat to existing open space. Transit improvements have been difficult to attain because there is no cohesive transit plan for the county. A lack of intergovernmental agreements can impede good design, leading to poor connectivity of sidewalks and some bicycle routes.

The desire for coordination and cooperation was expressed in terms of improved connectivity and cooperation between transit agencies and with respect to coordination across modes (i.e; sidewalks and parking options at rail stations, new grade crossings that would benefit both rail and road travel). Another theme woven through all the recommendations was a desire for more coordinated planning to facilitate travel by people with disabilities.

Maintain existing communities to preserve open space.

Participants at the caucus were very aware of recent open space initiatives and compact developments that accommodate more growth in less space. Lake County Forest Preserve District received high praise for acquisition of new lands and expansion of the Des Plaines River Trail. Other positive initiatives included: the revitalization of some downtowns, the county’s consideration of agricultural preservation, and the inclusion of transit-oriented development (TOD)² in the Regional Framework Plan.

Participants expressed concern that incentives do not encourage development in more established communities like North Chicago and Waukegan. Incentives were generally seen as a good way to encourage new policies.

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.

Excerpt from Lake County *Connecting Communities* Summit Report, July 24, 2001:

“We are concerned about the health of our physical environment. Air and water quality are important issues that we feel should be considered when making decisions about transportation investments and where growth is going to occur. We are also concerned about traffic congestion, the ability to use multiple travel modes to get around, efficient connections between modes, access to the transportation system by seniors and the disabled, and job access for Lake County residents and non-residents alike.”

One suggestion for new incentives was for the state to provide funding to locate train stations within town centers. Another was for the county to offer matching grants to municipalities for bicycle paths.

The lack of effective intergovernmental agreements was cited by almost everyone present as a barrier to accomplishing additional open space preservation. For example, some village governments were seen as not working in harmony with the good preservation efforts of the Forest Preserve District. Stronger county zoning provisions were recommended to improve and coordinate decision-making about open space.

Establish a grid network of accessible transit bus service throughout the developed parts of the county.

Stakeholders were united in supporting increased transit service. They have many different views of what “accessible bus service” means. Some focused on new ways to use existing service; Pace was seen as having improved access for people with disabilities (with new accessible buses) and for cyclists (with

¹ Intelligent Transportation Systems (ITS) are communication and management strategies that rely on advanced technology to improve travel.

² TOD is economic development clustered around mass transit stations and bus stations.

bike racks on all buses). Coordination problems between service boards and municipalities were mentioned frequently as presenting barriers to bus use, including the lack of bus-to-rail connections, the lack of a cohesive county-wide transit plan with buy-in from villages, and a lack of coordination between local paratransit programs.

Several people proposed increased funding or new funding sources for bus transit. They stipulated, however, that buses go to the places people want to reach. Specifically, east-west service needs to be increased, especially for access to some of the county's larger employers.

The group agreed that ITS would be beneficial but was unsure of the full implications. People had high expectations that ITS, specifically "traffic signal preemption" systems, which *allow buses to extend the timing of a green light*, would increase ridership.

Expand rail service.

Virtually everyone at the caucus mentioned the proposal to double-track the North Central and increase service as a significant benefit for the county. However, interactions between Metra, freight trains and Amtrak need to be better coordinated. Rail-to-rail bottlenecks and road-to-rail conflicts need to be addressed. High speed rail and more grade separations were recommended improvements.

The matter of access for people with disabilities and cyclists was raised. Although trains almost universally meet ADA³ standards, not all stations are accessible. Metra's resistance to carrying bicycles is an unpopular and baffling position to the general public, given the success of the other service boards in smoothly accommodating cyclists.

Additional improvements recommended were: increased service and frequency on existing lines, additional stations, better service to O'Hare (east-west links between the North Central and other Metra lines), expanded parking (in aesthetically suitable ways), new shuttle service to train stations, and expansion of existing "Shuttle Bug" service to employers.

Create communities where walking is a pleasant option for completion of trips, continue to expand the region's multi-use train network and create a network of safe bike/bus lanes on the region's east-west and north-south roads.

The Des Plaines River Trail won unanimous approval from caucus participants. In general, they expressed much more satisfaction on progress made on bikeways than on sidewalks. Responsibility for poor sidewalk coverage was seen as divided between local government (i.e., a lack of intra- and inter-town connectivity and lack of pedestrian access to some

transit nodes), mall developments where walking is difficult, and roads where walking is dangerous.

Many thought villages should educate the public about health benefits of walking and cycling, and provide better maps and signage in order to reverse the trend of increased obesity. One person stated it simply as "Give me more information and I will make different choices." Other low-cost suggestions included: signage that bicycles are intended users of local roads, snow removal on sidewalks, a commitment to village centers rather than sprawl development, and laws requiring sidewalks in new developments.

Make targeted improvements to the existing road network to relieve traffic congestion.

Numerous local road projects were cited as positive improvements. The most highly supported road improvements were intersection improvements such as left and right turn lanes or improved signal



Transit access is impeded by poor snow removal policies (Photo courtesy of BPIC Image Library)

turning. The group felt that managers of road maintenance or construction projects should minimize inconvenience to the community and to drivers to the extent possible, while still completing projects in the shortest possible time.

Participants speculated on the limitations of road expansion to meet ever increasing auto travel, citing the adverse consequences to pedestrians who have to cross wider intersections. Other people predicted increased vehicle travel in the near future due to a lack of incentives and mode choice.

New automobile underpasses and overpasses were cited as necessary to relieve congestion on roadways and to reduce road-rail conflicts. Additional recommendations included: car pool lanes on the toll road (with reduced tolls for high-occupancy vehicles), an assessment of how impact fees on new developments could help pay for the roads required to accommodate new travelers, and commitment of more funds to improve existing arterials.

³ ADA is the Americans with Disabilities Act, which requires improved access for people with physical mobility limitations.