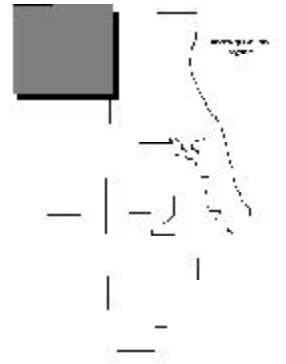




Connecting Communities McHenry County Caucus November 12, 2003

A Chicagoland Transportation and Air Quality Commission project in partnership with:
McHenry County Defenders



In late 2001, a group of McHenry County residents gathered at a *Connecting Communities* summit to discuss transportation planning, land use policy, and other issues. This group was concerned that agricultural land and open space was being swallowed up by sprawl and that transportation planning lacked input from local business, education and regional leaders. Consensus was reached on the need for innovative solutions like shuttle service that would connect community job centers and Metra stations as well as expansion and better coordination of Metra rail service with other transit services. Finally, the group wanted a comprehensive network of sidewalks and bicycle routes to connect communities throughout the county.

Two years later, some participants from the summit reconvened a *Connecting Communities* caucus to discuss progress in implementing their summit recommendations. There was concern that little had improved and that progress did not reflect the priorities of residents, but rather the priorities of developers and a few elected officials. In particular, the group was alarmed by rampant development, the loss of agriculture and open space, and the lack of plans to develop sensibly in the future. They were disappointed with the few improvements in bus and rail service. In response to the slow pace of change, this group had innovative solutions to problems currently facing their communities.

Preserve our agricultural heritage and our invaluable open space

Preservation of agricultural and open space in the county remained a high priority for caucus participants. In response to this, two groups formed in the last two years: the Nunda Township Open Space Committee and the county-wide Farmland Preservation Task Force. These efforts, however, are very new and the county still lacks incentives for farmers to retain their land.

Many participants suggested improvements based on locally-inspired models. They re-affirmed the *Connecting Communities* summit report and wanted to see Kane County's *2020 Land Resource Management Plan* used as a model for their own county. Implementation of the Route 47/Kishwaukee River Corridor Land Use and Transportation Plan (developed by the Conservation Design Forum) was also recommended. It was also suggested that communities and the county work to overcome the current practice, where individual plans contradict and compete with one another. Another potential solution to disappearing open space was a new county policy or state legislation requiring developers

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 McHenry County *Connecting Communities* Summit of September 19, 2001

"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. 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 developments 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."

to pay impact fees to support the cost of building schools and other new infrastructure. One participant also suggested that to preserve farmland, McHenry County Conservation District should buy the development rights to agricultural land so farmers don't feel pressure to sell to developers.

Coordinate transportation planning with business, education, and regional leaders

Attendees commented favorably on some changes since this recommendation was developed. One participant noted that McHenry County was coordinating its land use plan with the 2020 Regional Transportation Plan. Participants were pleased with the passage of House Bill 3061, Context Sensitive Design, which requires accommodations for all types of travel on a roadway project. Participants wanted this law extended locally and wanted all county road projects to include sidewalks and bicycle lanes.

However, much still remains unsolved; according to the group, small businesses are having trouble staying in business with the arrival of "big-box" stores. There was great concern that planning is done with a "1950-state-of-mind" where major new

roads seem to be the only option offered. One participant was increasingly alarmed because she felt she couldn't walk to the grocery store safely anymore. There was strong consensus that local employers needed to be more involved in community and transportation planning.

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

At the 2001 summit, participants visualized a triangular shuttle service connection between the major communities in the county: Crystal Lake, McHenry and Woodstock. Community members still had a high level of interest in seeing this implemented. There was hope that McHenry County Community College could be used as a test market for this kind of shuttle service. Participants cited community college students, young college-aged residents, and senior citizens as groups less likely to drive than other McHenry County residents, making them good targets for this project.

Expand and coordinate rail service

Participants noted that Metra is their primary connection to Chicago and wanted improved and expanded connectivity and travel options. The new station under construction in Crystal Lake was a welcome improvement. Double tracking to allow service increases on the Union Pacific/Northwest Line would be equally welcome.

Metra rail service connects poorly with other modes of transportation. Since many people in McHenry reach Metra by another form of transportation, there was support for more connecting bus service, allowing bicycles on Metra, more bike parking at stations, additional parking garages near commuter stations, and shuttle service from centrally located train stations to surrounding communities. This group wanted Metra planners to respond flexibly to the growing communities of McHenry County.

Network a comprehensive system of sidewalks and bicycle routes

While participants thought there was an increase in attention to pedestrians and bicyclists, they also thought that there wasn't enough *comprehensive* coverage of sidewalks and bicycle paths. For example, one participant noted that there was more discussion of the cost of inactivity and obesity, but subdivisions still did not have sidewalks. Another participant noted that while an effort was made by some developers to include bikepaths in new communities, there was little

effort to include bike racks or other places where they can be safely locked. Many were concerned that existing commercial areas, such as Rt. 14 in Crystal Lake, have no safe ways to walk, bike, or cross the street. In some cases shoppers are forced into their cars to do errands.

Some innovative solutions for improving bicycling and pedestrian options were to institute and market a "Walk to Work Day," to include sidewalks and bikepaths in new developments, and to place bicycle racks in prominent locations near businesses and train stations.

This part of the region is growing rapidly. Participants continue to feel strongly that sprawl is out of control and that more planning and foresight must go into development. There is an increasing fear that public open space and agricultural land that defines McHenry County is disappearing forever. This group would like to see elected officials, planners, and policymakers take the opportunity to make some unique and innovative choices to shape new developments in McHenry County.



*Caucus participants discuss changes in McHenry County...
...then share their ideas with the group.*