



Connecting Communities Southwest Metro Caucus January 22, 2004

A Chicagoland Transportation and Air Quality Commission project in partnership with:
Livable Communities Alliance & the Human Action Community Organization



The group that recently convened for a Southwest Metro Region *Connecting Communities* Caucus was aware of the relationship between transportation options, the environment, and community development. They understood the processes and plans throughout the region for expanding, repairing, and improving the various transportation systems. This awareness led participants to question motivations and direction of many projects. There was consensus within the group that many of the officially recommended projects didn't promote the most viable alternatives for the community; many of the projects were seen as expensive and disruptive to the character and environment of the southwest corner of this region.

Substantially increase transit options

Participants cited the inclusion of the Starline proposal in the 2030 Regional Transportation Plan, discussion of Metra stations in Beecher and Manhattan, and bike racks on all Pace buses as signs of progress for the region. While some suggested that the late night shuttle from Joliet to other communities was progress, others questioned whether this was an improvement, noting that the shuttle was "just going from one dead end location to another." While the group was somewhat positive about new transit options, they were conflicted because they felt that municipalities had resisted consideration of alternative options; participants noted that the building of parking lots in these communities on green space had sent the message that green space wasn't valued.

Participants focused on connectivity between Metra and town centers as an inexpensive way to increase transit options in the region. The group suggested: shuttle service from Peotone to the University Park Metra station; better coordination of information dissemination between Pace and Metra; and finally, more direct and seamless transportation options to O'Hare airport. Additionally, participants wanted to see improved Dial-a-Ride service for seniors.

Expand options for pedestrians, bicyclists, seniors, the disabled, and children

Progress on this recommendation was met with mixed reviews; participants noted that pedestrian and bicycle projects take a certain degree of political will.

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 the Southwest Metro Region *Connecting Communities* Summit Report, February 2002:

The Southwest Metro Region was shaped by railroads and waterways. Irish, German, and Scandinavian immigrants were the first laborers to aid in the construction 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, served passenger traffic, and also introduced 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."

Impediments to projects included poor municipal support and poor enforcement of pedestrian and bicycle rights. Participants suggested that the lack of regional connectivity could be attributed to the fact that not all municipalities require shoulders on local roads to be paved. For instance, Mokena is requiring walking and biking paths along roads and Bolingbrook is installing new bike trails, but there was the general feeling that not much was being done to get people out of their cars and to consider other options. There has not been visible movement to connect bike trails and sidewalks between different municipalities. The group was also concerned that regional planning bodies like CATS as well as local municipalities like New Lenox are giving "lip service" to the concepts of context sensitive design¹, but not putting money or "muscle" behind implementation.

Since little had been done to increase accommodations for all pedestrians and bicyclists, this group had some simple and creative ideas to increase pedestrian and bicycle coverage in

communities. Simple and inexpensive solutions included better signage on paths and increased municipal cooperation. More creative solutions included installing bathrooms and vending machines along trails and paths.

Develop with sensitivity to the environment

Participants felt that very little progress had occurred in meeting this recommendation. References to context sensitive design and the new long-range plan in New Lenox were seen as possible signs that decision-makers are starting to say the right things. The only other indicator of progress participants noted was that increasingly farmers in these communities were being known for their soil and water conservation practices. Aside from improved agricultural practices, participants felt that the abbreviation "S.O.S." (Same Old Stuff) characterized conservation activities in the southwestern part of the region. Participants cited examples of the water treatment plan, which was completed without regard to the sensitive Hickory Creek watershed. Most municipalities are continuing business as usual without meaningful plans to conserve and preserve green space.

This group demanded more from their municipalities and local planning bodies. They would like to see planning include consideration for the environment; municipalities should demand higher standards from developers. They want a campaign to recognize the impact that poor planning decisions have on the environment.

Redesign, repair, and retrofit our roads and bridges

This group felt that "politics is not progressive enough" in the southwest metro region communities. Costly projects like I-355 and the possible airport at Peotone need to be abandoned and funding redirected to less costly projects like car pool lanes and the widening of the Sauk Trail. The group felt strongly that money should be spent to improve and maintain existing roads rather than to build new ones. Participants also felt that major intersections need to be re-engineered and that there need to be pedestrian "walk" signals at places where there are pedestrian crossings. The progress reported on this recommendation, like reconstruction of local bridges, addition of turning lanes, and redesign of the exit off I-57, did not include sidewalk widening or shoulder paving – something residents would like to see. This group was keenly aware of the planning decisions local municipalities make and the relationship these

decisions have on the environment and character of their communities. Participants want municipalities and local elected officials to be accountable for their actions and expect developers and builders to respect the environment and accommodate multiple types of travel. This group would like local municipalities to coordinate their plans and consider alternatives before making decisions in favor of expensive projects.

¹ Context Sensitive Design is a road-building method that considers the needs of all roadway users by including stakeholders in the planning and visioning sessions for transportation corridor projects, through an early and continuous involvement process.



Southwest Metro Caucus participants discuss local improvements and issues still to be addressed.



The I&M Canal is a historical industrial corridor that now offers recreational opportunities for local residents.