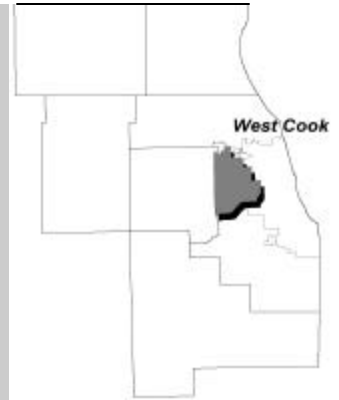




Connecting Communities West Cook County Caucus November 19, 2003

A Chicagoland Transportation and Air Quality Commission project in partnership with:
Oak Park Greens and League of Women Voters: River Forest



West suburban Cook County is confronting several land use and transportation challenges. Many of these concerns were first raised during a 2002 *Connecting Communities* summit, where participants had the opportunity to recommend alternatives and solutions to meet these challenges. Major themes at the summit included strong support for walking and cycling options, better coordination of transit, and attention by planners to the public's input. Members of this original group reconvened as a caucus to discuss the implementation and progress of their *Connecting Communities* summit recommendations.

Significantly Increase Rail Transit Interconnectivity

In the year-and-a-half since the summit, regional and state planners have committed to review a full set of alternatives for east-west travel, including potential rail as well as potential expressway options along the I-290 corridor. Participants noted that there was a great deal of skepticism about what will happen in this corridor.

Several participants felt that there was a good faith effort to look at alternatives to widening I-290, while other participants were unsure that alternatives would be given serious consideration. There was clear consensus at the caucus that the Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT) needs to be more open with the public regarding plans for I-290. The group expressed that planners and elected officials will coordinate different plans and seek out local community input and support, particularly on suggestions like a "cap" over the highway in Oak Park.

Improve Access and Coordination of Transit

Caucus participants were pleased with the signs of a "renewed commitment" in some communities to public transit, represented by new clean fuel buses, the addition of bike racks on buses, and better signage near transit stops.

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 West Cook summit report:

"Chicago residents migrated to the communities of West Cook County after the Great Chicago Fire in 1871. The Elevated train was extended to Oak Park in 1895. The Prairie Path was once a successful commuter rail line traversing Chicago, Aurora, and Elgin, though the route closed when Interstate 290 opened. Today the area pulses with major industrial job centers located near Schiller Park and Franklin Park, as well as O'Hare International Airport, the Rosemont Convention Center and the Allstate Arena. Cicero is the tenth largest city in Illinois and the seventh fastest growing. Western Cook County is economically and racially diverse. Almost all of us live near a bus stop and over 80% of us live near a train station. We are united in our desire to have more choices in the way we travel within and beyond our communities. We realize this will require a dramatic shift from the current "auto-centric" culture. We are firm in our belief that "automobile mono-culture," a term one of us used to describe current priorities, will only get worse unless we take forceful steps to reverse the trend."

Participants were hopeful that communities in west suburban Cook County would continue these efforts and add more bike lockers, indoor parking and other bike-friendly amenities for transit riders. People also expressed an interest in seeing electronic "countdowns" at transit stations to let passengers know how much time until a train arrives.

On a regional scale, the development of a long-range plan, such as the Chicago Region Environmental and Transportation Efficiency Project (CREATE), was seen as a commitment to improved passenger and freight rail service, that would benefit of providing economic,

environmental, and efficiency benefits for the region. The failure of the Regional Transportation Authority (RTA) to make significant headway on an “interconnected pass” for seamless transfers between the three transit agencies was noted by caucus participants.

There was some consensus that emphasis needs to be placed on park-n-rides, increased bicycle amenities near transit, and increased transit. Additionally this group would like to see European multi-modal models adopted, as seen in places like Amsterdam and London. One participant pointed out that in Amsterdam more accommodations are provided for bicycles than for cars; currently over 40 percent of all trips in Amsterdam are made by bicycle.

Provide More Options for Walking and Cycling

Several participants at this caucus spoke strongly about the need to break free of the “car culture” that exists in this part of the region. Poor attitudes on the part of motorists and elected officials toward bicycle and pedestrian projects are still a concern in west suburban Cook County. For example, some officials have shown resistance to adding bike lanes on area streets.

Among the improvements and changes participants wanted to see were: more cycle-friendly traffic lighting that would allow traffic lights to change even without a car present at an intersection, incentives given by retailers to shoppers who bike to stores, more pedestrian amenities like pocket parks and landscaped walkways, and free training by municipalities for bicyclists and pedestrians on how to travel safely.

Planners Must Heed the Public’s Will

There was a general sentiment at this meeting that the public voice is fractured in west suburban Cook County. There are many meetings but little unified action. Several participants attributed this to the many planning bodies of the region and an “unwillingness to incorporate public involvement in any meaningful way into transportation decision-making.” Others added that there needs to be more consensus among the small municipalities in west suburban Cook County and an effort made to focus on broader sub-regional goals.

To improve public participation and help generate

one voice, participants suggested requiring small municipalities to plan transportation projects together. Municipalities could work together to secure funding for projects and work from start to finish on the planning, construction, and the implementation of each project.

This group would especially like to see more public participation in discussions about major capital projects like the East-West Corridor. The choice to expand transit or widen the highway will have serious impacts on communities. At the local level, participants would like to see planners adopt more European models for expanding transportation choice. If everyone is included in planning and new and innovative ideas are considered, change is more effective and meaningful.



Caucus participants discuss the recommendations made for West Cook in 2002...

...then share their ideas with the group.

