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PRESS RELEASE

Region Must Change or Choke, Civic Group Tells Task Force

Regional transportation system needs reorganization and additional funding

Chicago is already one of the most congested areas in the country, and that traffic congestion will grow worse in coming years without significant reforms to the way the six-county region makes transportation planning and funding decisions, according to Chicago Metropolis 2020, a business-backed civic group.

"We must transform the way we make transportation and land use decisions or else face regional gridlock on a scale that will starve our economy and compromise our quality of life," Chicago Metropolis President and CEO George Ranney, Jr., testified before the Regional Transportation Task Force.

Over the next several decades, the Chicago region will add almost 2 million more people and a million more cars, Mr. Ranney testified. If present trends continue, the region's residents will also be making more and longer trips and living in places with fewer transit options.

The transportation system that has served the region well in the past must be streamlined to face the future, Ranney said. "We're wasting resources because our transportation planning process does not reflect the changing reality of where people live and need to go. And our regional land use planning process – or lack thereof – does not leverage our existing transportation infrastructure."

Chicago Metropolis 2020 testified that traffic congestion is already taxing the region's businesses and families and will get worse:

- Chicago area residents spend more time commuting to their jobs than the residents of any other region in the country except New York. Chicago area traffic congestion is among the worst in the country is getting worse at a rate of 1.3% per year.
- The Texas Transportation Institute has estimated that the economic cost of congestion in our region – longer commutes, wasted fuel, freight stuck in traffic, and so on – at \$4 billion a year. This cost of congestion has been growing 13% a year for nearly two decades and shows no sign of abating.

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- The worst traffic congestion in coming decades will be in the suburbs as the region's population and job centers continue to diffuse throughout the region, leading to travel patterns, particularly suburb-to-suburb trips, that are not well accommodated by the existing transportation infrastructure.
- Metropolis 2020 has calculated that a "business as usual" approach to land use and transportation for the next 30 years will result in the average Chicago area resident spending 80 additional hours a year in a car – or two work weeks.
- 82 percent of the region's residents already believe that roadways are "very" or "moderately" congested.

Ranney also told the Task Force that the costs of poor transportation and land use planning often fall on the residents least able to afford them. "It's sad and shameful that we can look at a map of demographic changes between 1990 and 2000 and see jobs moving in one direction, affordable housing moving in the other, and few good transportation connections between the two."

Ranney's testimony pointed out that transportation funding has not kept up with the region's needs, or even with inflation. "We need to invest more," Ranney told the Task Force, "because the money, if used effectively, would be more than returned to families and businesses who would enjoy the economic benefits of reduced congestion."

Ranney cited The National Highway Research Program found that a 10% reduction in congestion in the Chicago region would have an annual value of \$1.3 billion for Chicago area businesses.

Chicago Metropolis 2020 presented the Task Force with five key recommendations for meeting the region's future development and transportation challenges:

1. **Create a Regional Planning Organization (RPO) that will perform and unify the planning and financial management functions necessary to meet our transportation challenges.** The RPO would forge a strong regional agency that combines and improves upon the current work of CATS and NIPC, the planning activities of the RTA and the Illinois Toll Highway Authority, as well as essential new responsibilities that none of them is doing.
2. **Create County Planning Organizations (CPOs) with municipal representatives to give local officials more control over their transportation and growth challenges.** Modeled after the county institutions created by the 1987 Stormwater Management Act, the CPOs would give local and county officials a tool for dealing with the biggest transportation challenge of the future: mobility in the collar counties, where auto travel will continue to grow exponentially and development patterns are not likely to support significant transit use.

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3. **The functions currently performed by PACE should be assumed by the County Planning Organizations.** In the collar counties, local transportation decisions belong in the hands of local officials who are in the best position to design appropriate and specialized local services: van pooling to help local employers, paratransit, transit-on-demand, shuttle connections to Metra stations, or the comprehensive services called for in the DuPage County transit plan.
4. **Expand Metra service so that it can make better use of its assets, particularly to accommodate reverse commuters.** The Metra funding formula and governance structure should be changed to give it more incentive to meet the needs of city workers commuting to suburban jobs. Metra should also have more authority and responsibility for promoting transit-oriented development – taking a valuable asset like a transit station and planning an attractive mix of retail, commercial, and residential development around it.
5. **The Toll Highway Authority should aggressively expand the use of I-Pass, consider toll increases and congestion pricing, and bring its current assets into a state of good repair.** The Authority should focus on operating its current system. Expansions of the system should not be considered without the approval of the Regional Planning Organization. Metropolis 2020 strongly supports the Authority’s current efforts to promote electronic toll collection and to experiment with variable pricing techniques.

Ranney asked the Task Force to find cost savings in the current system; a one percent savings on the roughly \$5 billion dollars the region spends annually amounts to \$50 million.

But he noted that it is more important to begin the process of reforming the system so that it will be able meet the region’s future needs. “We have no agency that is accountable for looking at the whole six county region and making decisions based on the most efficient way to get our residents where they are trying to go, regardless of what political boundaries they are crossing or what mode of transit they are using,” Ranney said. “When it comes to regional transportation, where exactly does the buck stop?”

About Chicago Metropolis 2020

Chicago Metropolis 2020 is a nonprofit civic organization created by The Commercial Club of Chicago in 1999 to advocate for better regional planning and smart investments to promote the region’s long term health.

The Regional Transportation Task Force was created by Governor Blagojevich and the Illinois General Assembly to examine possible reforms to the transportation system. The Task Force is chaired by Congressman William Lipinski. It has 11 voting members appointed by the Governor and state legislative leaders and has been charged with reporting back to the General Assembly by March 1, 2004.

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