

Mobilizing Regional Change

THE STORY OF THE REGIONAL PLANNING BOARD

Bill Hangle, Jr.

On August 8, 2005, Illinois Governor Rod Blagojevich signed a law creating a regional agency charged with coordinating land use and transportation planning for all of northeastern Illinois: the Regional Planning Board (RPB).

To anyone unschooled in the politics of public bureaucracies, the new agency would seem unremarkable. It simply merged the region's principal transportation planner (the Chicago Area Transportation Study, or CATS) with its principal land use planner (the Northeastern Illinois Planning Commission, or NIPC, pronounced "nipsy"). The idea was that effective land use planning required full coordination with transportation planning, and vice versa. CATS and NIPC, decades old, were built for an earlier time, and when Governor Blagojevich signed the law he made their merger sound perfectly sensible.

"As Northeastern Illinois continues to grow and communities expand, we need to make sure we're planning ahead to accommodate the additional traffic and increased demand on our transit systems," he said. "By combining the region's existing planning authorities into one board, we can maximize our limited resources and improve coordination on both transportation and land use needs for the entire region."

But if the logic is simple, the process of merging two long-established public agencies is anything but. How did this particular fusion come to pass? Last August's announcement was the culmination of more than five years of sustained effort from civic groups, regional officials, and state legislators. On September 23, 2005, three key players gathered in Chicago's Hotel Monaco to explain to the Leadership Exchange how they did it.

LAUNCHING THE IDEA:

**Frank Beal,
Executive Director,
Chicago Metropolis 2020**

“We were persistent and annoying and repetitive, and we kept saying that it needs to be done.”

“The idea of merging CATS and NIPC and creating a stronger planning agency is at least a decade old,” said Frank Beal. “Civic organizations have been arguing this for a long time.”

Beal runs Chicago Metropolis 2020, a nonprofit created by the Commercial Club of Chicago to implement the ideas laid out in its 1999 report, “Chicago Metropolis 2020: Preparing Metropolitan Chicago for the 21st Century.” The CATS/NIPC merger was only one of that report’s recommendations, but it was an important one, since the Commercial Club saw the lack of strong regional institutions as a major barrier to effective regional development.

“The Commercial Club’s 1999 report was based on two simple ideas,” said Beal. “The first: Metropolitan areas [i.e. regions, not just cities] are the unit of economic competitiveness in the 21st century. There is where the race is won or lost, and if you’re not paying attention to the economy of the metropolitan area, you’re going to be missing something.

“And the second simple idea is that if you’re going to be a winner, you’ve got to have a strong physical and social infrastructure. For which you need strong regional institutions. We have strong local government and strong state government, but the regional institutions are nonexistent, inadequate, or weak.”

In the wake of the 1999 report, Metropolis 2020 began producing more specific recommendations, including transportation and freight plans. Each reiterated the need for a CATS/NIPC merger. “We produced a transportation plan,” Beal said. “But we don’t represent the people. We needed a public institution, and therefore we recommended that we should combine CATS and NIPC and create a new agency.

“Two years later, we came out with a report about freight,” Beal continued. “The number one recommendation was, create a regional planning agency. We were persistent and annoying and repetitive, and we kept saying that it needs to be done.”

Despite the predictable opposition to the merger, there were glimmers of support from the start. “We went to both CATS and NIPC’s boards from day one and told them our position,” Beal said. “The reaction we got

ranged from, ‘Mind your own damn business,’ to, ‘Yes, we agree,’ to, ‘Perhaps you’re right, but I can’t say anything.’”

So Beal and Metropolis 2020 began working to shape public opinion. The group pitched its ideas regularly to newspaper editorial boards. It sent the resulting editorials to legislators. Metropolis 2020 testified in Springfield, the state capital, when CATS was up for recertification as the region’s designated Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO). It delivered letters of support from business groups and labor alike.

“Twice, over this period, we testified that CATS shouldn’t be recertified because they were doing transportation planning without consideration of land use planning, which is like one hand clapping — you can’t do it,” said Beal. “We got the leaders of the Illinois State Chamber of Commerce, the Chicago Chamber of Commerce, the Commercial Club, and the president of the Illinois AFL-CIO to sign a joint letter saying that they supported a regional planning board.

“So both labor and business are saying that our failure to do good planning is having an economic consequence on this region,” Beal said. “We’ve got civic groups and other interests weighing in. We’ve got editors saying it’s a good idea. We kept sending materials to the General Assembly saying, this is a good idea, all these papers think it’s a good idea, and you should think it’s a good idea.”

As support solidified, Chicago Metropolis 2020 hired a legal team to draft actual legislation. “You’re always in a better position if you’ve got paper with you,” Beal said. “Over the past decade, they have taken staff resources away from the legislators, so it’s a lot easier if you can provide the legislation. So we drafted a modern, 21st century law creating the regional planning board and circulated that among the legislature. That’s not what got passed — something else got passed — but it forced the issue.”

TAKING THE BATON:

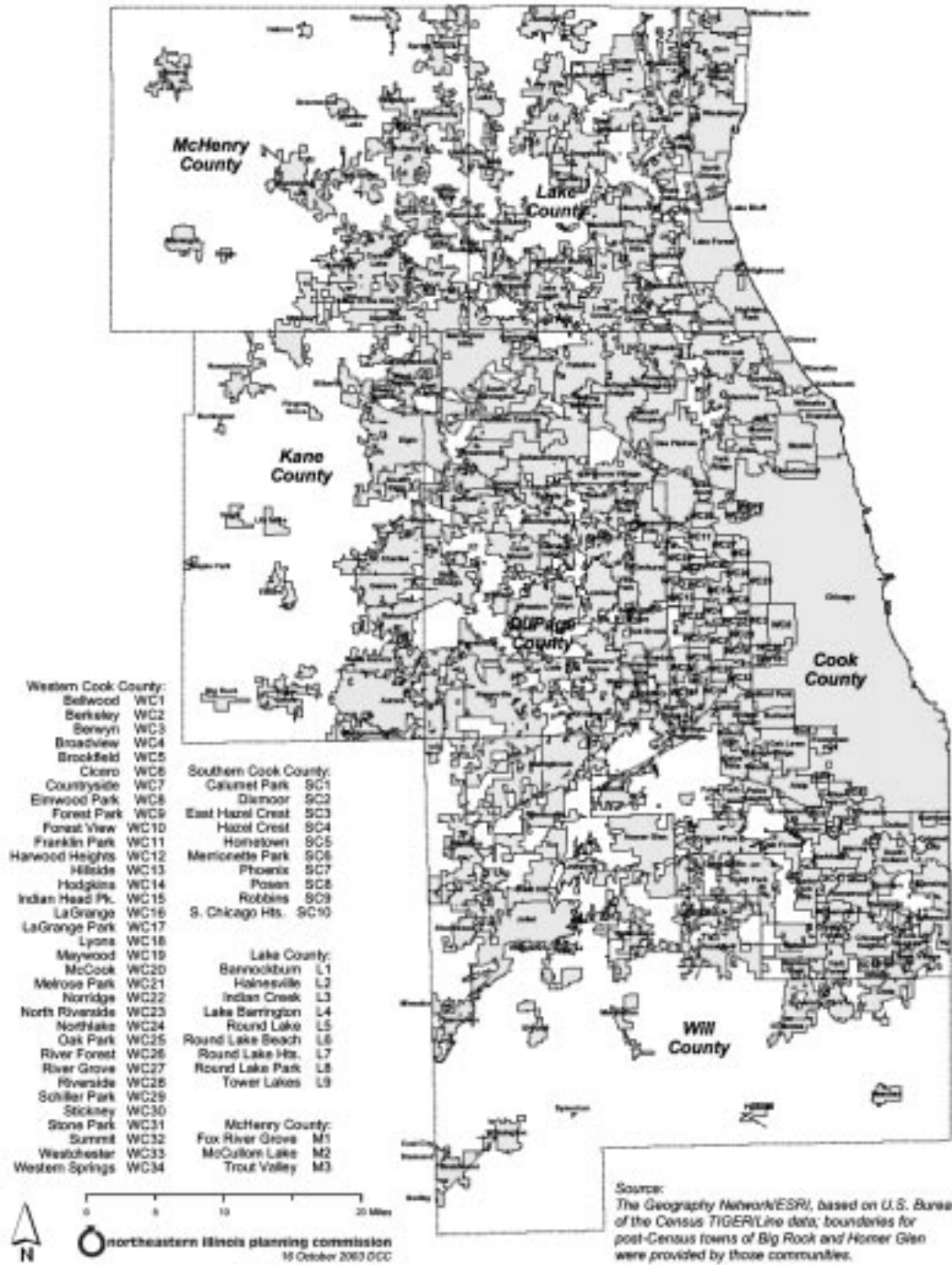
**David Bennett, Executive Director,
Metropolitan Mayors Caucus**

“The areas that get the dollars are those that have their act together.”

The greater Chicago area includes 272 separate municipalities, and in 1997, Chicago’s Mayor Richard Daley invited their leaders to join a Metropolitan Mayors Caucus. David Bennett, the Caucus’s executive director, had been hearing about a CATS/NIPC merger for 20 years, and he gave Chicago Metropolis 2020 a lot of credit for helping

The many municipal boundaries of Chicago's 6-county region

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get it done. “Yes, they were annoying,” he said with a laugh, “but they were very helpful, too.”

But there were other players, and the Caucus served as an active broker between local mayors and county executives, interested legislators in Springfield, and staff at CATS and NIPC.

The mayors and local officials brought a bottom-line interest to the table. “In a day and age when there are limited resources available, the areas that get the dollars are those that have their act together,” said Bennett. “The mayors were very much interested in saying, ‘we want to be leaders in regional planning and land use efforts,’ and integrating into one entity the two entities we have now.”

The Mayors Caucus got formally involved in the merger debate in early 2004, when the Illinois General Assembly created a Transportation Task Force whose agenda included a CATS/NIPC merger, regional transit reform, and even the creation of a “transit czar.” “The whole effort got bogged down in politics,” Bennett said. “But the mayors said, ‘We really can’t give up on this idea of merging CATS and NIPC. We need to keep plugging at it and get it separated from these issues.’”

So Bennett went directly to the boards of CATS and NIPC and asked them to produce their own plan for a merger. It took some prodding, but they soon had a list of eight reorganization scenarios. “We said, ‘this is a great starting point. Now we need to whittle these down to one particular strategy,’” Bennett recalled.

That strategy would have to address the mayors’ three main concerns, the first of which was legal: the new agency had to be structured to keep the flow of federal dollars coming without disruption. “We did not want to jeopardize the state’s ability to get federal funding for highway and transportation projects,” said Bennett.

Their second concern was tactical: the mayors wanted the new agency to be potent enough to serve as an effective advocate. “There have been times when we stumble over ourselves,” said Bennett. “We’ve gone to Washington for transportation dollars where you’ve got the transportation authority coming, the mayors coming, the business community coming, and they’re all saying, ‘Here are our priorities.’ Sometimes they mesh and sometimes they don’t. This new agency should be something that can be a voice that marries all these concerns, so that when we go to Washington or Springfield, we’re all singing from the same hymnal.”

The third was simply about local control. “We wanted to make sure that local governments retained control over local land use and zoning decisions,” Bennett said. “There is always this overriding concern by mayors and county board executives that this Regional Planning Board might come in and tell them what types of zoning they need to have in their community, what types of businesses, what types of housing. It goes back many years in Illinois law that these are exclusively local rights, and the mayors wanted to make sure they were maintained.”

Meanwhile, as the Mayors Caucus, CATS, and NIPC were starting to hammer out a plan, legislators in Springfield were ready to move on legislation. State Representative Suzanne “Suzie” Bassi contacted the Caucus.

“The memo said, ‘We want some ideas by April 14th, and if you don’t give us your ideas we’re going to proceed without you,’” Bennett recalled. “So we took their challenge, geared ourselves up, and ended up hiring DePaul University’s Government Assistance Program to facilitate our discussions. While things got a little testy at times, we were able to come up with this bill.”

THE SPRINGFIELD SPONSOR:



**State Representative
Suzie Bassi**

“NIPC does land use planning. CATS does transportation planning. Why are they not working together?”

Representative Bassi, whose 54th District is a suburban area northwest of Chicago, knows well the perils that await those that even hint at challenging local control. “Illinois has 7,000 units of government,” she said, “more than any other state. We’re a local control state, and when you get involved in legislation, local control is a major issue.”

So she wasn’t surprised when fellow Republicans warned her away from any involvement with the CATS/NIPC merger. “My people said it would ruin my career, that I would never be able to get reelected if it took this, that it was nuts,” she recalled. “They said, ‘This kind of stuff would never pass, and why in the Sam Hill are you doing this, Suzie, when it doesn’t do anything for your area?’

“I said, ‘Yeah it does, it’s regional transportation, and if we’re not looking at regional transportation we’re cutting off our nose to spite our face.’”

Bassi, a former teacher, school board member, and self-described “soccer mom,” has been a legislator for seven years, and among her immediate concerns was the traffic congestion now endemic to the region, compounded by the lack of coordination between the region’s public transit agencies. She’d become convinced of the need for a merger over the course of serving as a member of the Assembly’s transit committee.

“After being involved in some of these earlier meetings with NIPC and CATS, I myself was saying, ‘NIPC does land use planning. CATS does transportation planning. Why are they not working together?’ she said. “This doesn’t make sense.”

“Thank goodness the Mayors Caucus got involved. . . .”

When Metropolis 2020 came along with its legislation, Bassi recalled thinking, “It’s about time. I want to be a part of it.” After conferring with Democratic colleagues, she decided to sponsor the legislation herself. “Most of the resistance is going to come from Republicans, so better it be a Republican who carries the legislation,” she said.

Among her first tasks was to push back against the original Metropolis 2020 legislation, which was felt to be premature. “My leadership said ‘Don’t you dare, because it will be disastrous, and how will we get people to negotiate if there’s something already out there?’ We went back and forth and back and forth, and everybody’s saying that this is a Daley plot and it’s going to ruin the suburbs and it’s not going to happen, and the city’s going to suck in everything. It was an interesting process,” she added with a laugh.

“Thank goodness the Mayors Caucus got involved. When I went to a couple of the planning groups, I’m sure they thought I was the devil personified: who’s this chubby little blonde who’s interested in regional planning? It was like, well, we’re looking for the same kind of thing, let’s get this done.

“It was also helpful that we could say, legislatively, ‘If you don’t do it, we will.’”

Bassi worked with Metropolis 2020 and the Mayors Caucus to craft something acceptable, and it wasn’t always easy. “At one point, Metropolis 2020 said, ‘It’s not strong enough,’ and then the mayors are saying, ‘It’s too much, we’re out of here,’ and then we get down to the week before the session and it’s filed and ready to go, and the parliamentarian says, ‘We’re not going to accept the language.’ So we went back and changed the language so we could get it to the floor.”

They rushed it through the House, and then went to work on Senate members who had the same concerns as many of her House colleagues. “The Republicans are going, ‘Oh no, you’re destroying the suburbs.’” Bassi said. “And I had to assure them that this was not what was going to happen, that we’d protected local control.”

The bill passed the House and Senate with unanimous support and was signed into law in August, 2005.

TODAY: An Agency Begins

In October, the Regional Planning Board began a three-year transition period. Board members and officers were announced, and the chair is Mayor Gerald Bennett of Palos Hills. The search for an executive director is underway. CATS and NIPC staff went on a joint retreat in December, identifying strengths, weaknesses, and goals ranging from enhanced regional economic growth to reduced asthma among the region’s residents. By early 2006 they will move into new offices in Chicago’s Sears Tower.

But if it is too early to judge whether the new agency meets its creators’ hopes and expectations, it is not too early to draw lessons. The merger was the result of a combination of forces: the regional business community’s concern for future growth, local mayors’ interest in accessing federal dollars while retaining local control, and state legislators’ interest in quality-of-life issues like traffic congestion and public transportation. It took a variety of proposals, counter-proposals, and negotiations, and it took a lot of work by public officials and citizen advocates alike.

Mostly what it took was a sustained effort to convince the region’s many players that a more effective regional institution could benefit them all. “What we’re talking about is not the structure or the legislation as much as we’re talking about the focus,” said John Parr, the head of the Alliance for Regional Stewardship. “The point of this sort of case study is that in some ways it matters less what the structure or policy is, and more how you mobilize the region to make something happen, whether it’s in Springfield — or in Harrisburg.”

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The Right Message at the Right Time to the Right People: Making the Right Case for Regional Initiatives

Scott Goldstein, Vice President for Policy and Planning, Metropolitan Planning Council



Long before state law made it a reality, Scott Goldstein was a strong supporter of the Regional Planning Board concept. Goldstein is a vice president with the Metropolitan Planning Council (MPC), a Chicago-based nonprofit that promotes smart, coordinated development. Over the last ten years, as the Chicago region has grown and simultaneously grown hungry for deals to support itself, the case for regional cooperation has become steadily easier to make.

“When I started in 1995, we had just finished a document called ‘The Case for Regional Cooperation,’” Goldstein recalled. “A week into the job, my boss said, ‘Go out to Lake in the Hills and give this presentation.’”

“Lake in the Hills is about fifty miles from here, and at the time its population was about 5,000 people. It was a dinner club type thing. All the mayors come together. They’re eating their chicken dinner, I gave my presentation, and there were no questions. And I left. It had absolutely no impact.”

But since then, between 1995 and 2005, metropolitan Chicago’s population has grown by 11 percent. Lake in the Hills is now home to 25,000 people. Fringe areas have new pressures, new problems, and a new impetus to work together. One of Goldstein’s favorite examples is the region’s joint courtship of Boeing’s new corporate headquarters. Chicago was competing with Denver and Dallas, so city, state, and suburban officials collaborated to create a list of possible sites across the region, with the understanding that they’d mutually accept whatever Boeing chose. When the company picked a downtown site, Goldstein said, the suburban mayors stuck with the deal.

What kept the infighting to a minimum was the mutual realization that Boeing’s choice would help the region, no matter where the actual bricks-and-mortar headquarters were, Goldstein said.

“The jobs in Boeing — where do these executives live? They don’t all live in Chicago,” Goldstein said. “A lot of them live in the suburbs, and pay taxes

in the suburbs. It benefits the entire region. If they had gone to the suburbs instead, Chicago would’ve benefited as well. What law firms would Boeing hire? A lot of law firms are headquartered downtown. I’m not saying there is no parochial fighting. There is. But when crunch time comes. . . .”

That mutual understanding is the result, in part, of steady pressure from planners and smart-growth advocates, said Goldstein. MPC supported the Regional Planning Board in part because it would keep that pressure from dissipating among competing planning agencies. “The division between CATS

and NIPC was not creating a seamless plan that the public understood, that could energize,” he said. “Our business leaders said,

‘we want the buck to stop somewhere. It doesn’t stop anywhere right now.’”

But ultimately, Goldstein said, spending agendas for big deals like the federal transportation package are worked out among the region’s politicians. “They’re not going to do it till the very last minute, which frustrates us to no end,” he said with a laugh. “And they’re not going to tell anybody about it. There’s no public process. CATS? Forget CATS. Forget NIPC. It’s the elected officials who, at the end of the day, make that choice.

“Now, it’ll all be based on good planning if we’ve done our jobs well,” he said. “Hopefully, we have educated these folks, so when the deal is made on what the top two or three projects are, they are good projects for the region. We’re not there yet, but I think we have a framework in place here that we didn’t have before.”

What is also in place is a greater awareness of the benefits of regional cooperation. “That speech, ‘The Case for Regional Cooperation,’ we used to go out and give it. We don’t do that anymore,” Goldstein said. “Now we’re into, ‘How do we do the next Boeing? How do we work together and make something happen?’”

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— Bill Hangle, Jr.