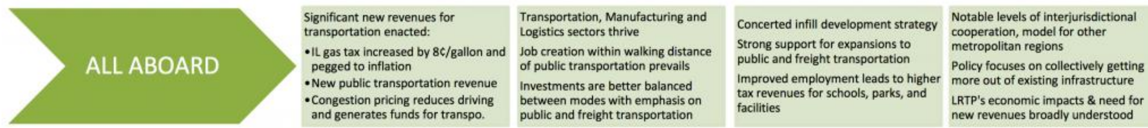
Cook County’s Transportation Plan Thinking Big, But Where’s The Money?

by Steven Vance | October 20, 2014



A description of Cook County’s draft “All Aboard” transportation plan scenario.

Earlier this year, Cook County embarked on its first transportation plan since 1940, asking residents to weigh in on how and where to improve transportation across the second most populous county in America. That feedback has helped the transportation department to draft a new vision statement – that world-class transportation will spur economic growth and enhance quality of life – plus four scenarios for the future, which the public can vote on in an online survey.

The new plan will guide policy choices that determine where and how the county invests its resources, and to estimate how much more revenue is needed to fulfill those goals. One key policy decision will determine whether or not the region will fight for more resources in Springfield. One particularly galling imbalance is the Illinois Department of Transportation’s strict 55/45 split, which sends an outsized proportion of dollars downstate even though most of the state’s people and economy reside in Chicagoland.

The most dour of the four scenarios envisioned is called “Running on Empty.” It supposes that the current conditions depressing local transportation investment – the 55/45 split, declining gas tax revenues, municipalities looking out only for themselves, and sprawling, low density growth – will continue to “undermine” Cook County’s transportation system, communities, and economy.

A slightly less depressing scenario, “Stuck in First Gear,” differs minimally from the first by supposing that the county will pursue additional grants from the state and federal governments. The county would rein in sprawl slightly by encouraging more density around train stations, for example. This would increase use of some underutilized bits of the transportation system, but also tax others, similar to how some parts of the CTA system are now becoming overcrowded. However, an overall lack of funding leads transit service quality to continue its long-term decline, making transit-oriented development a tough sell.

Scenarios three and four more closely reflect the goals of the GO TO 2040 regional plan, but depend on the state to update its antiquated policies. “Picking Up Steam” says that Cook County would stop diverting gas tax revenues away from infrastructure, and influence the state to do the same. And instead of distributing transportation funds by a strict 55/45 split, the Illinois Department of Transportation would use performance measures to guide dollars to where they’re most needed, e.g., densely populated Cook County. Those policy changes would add funds that could address the area's considerable maintenance backlog, and start to invest in more bicycle, pedestrian, and transit projects. However, the third scenario isn't all rosy: It's marred by development that continues to drift further away from existing transit and freight facilities.

The final scenario, "All Aboard," is one which supposes additional funding and new development surrounding existing transportation resources. Specifically, it assumes that the state gas tax will be raised by eight cents per gallon, and pegged to inflation. Policy changes would target county revenues towards compact and mixed-use development on infill locations, and expand regional transit "to reach underserved destinations." Building within existing neighborhoods is a core tenet of GO TO 2040, and focusing new spending there would stabilize neighborhoods and expand businesses.