

6.11 Community Conversations

Summary of Community Conversations

November 2009

The Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP) has been charged to develop a regional plan, called *GO TO 2040* to help northeastern Illinois accommodate an anticipated 2.8 million new residents and 1.8 million jobs in the next three decades. The plan will shape the region's transportation system and land use development patterns, while also addressing the natural environment, economic development, housing, education, human services and other quality-of-life factors such as education, health, employment, and arts and culture. Leaders of *GO TO 2040*, Metropolitan Chicago's first truly comprehensive regional planning campaign, are encouraging the public to participate in making choices that will impact the future of our region. Led by CMAP, the *GO TO 2040* campaign will guide investment and development decisions across the seven-county region.

Community Conversations served as a localized tool to share the Regional Vision created by the agency, the first step of the *GO TO 2040* plan. In addition, these conversations supported the agency's efforts to better understand existing conditions and promote the research being executed to evaluate potential planning strategies (steps 2 and 3 of the *GO TO 2040* plan timeline). Furthermore, Community Conversations helped to reinforce a community base for the subsequent stages of the plan.

Through staff outreach efforts and the *GO TO 2040* Partnership Program, CMAP coordinated Community Conversations as well as other initiatives such as the Bold Ideas Contests and booth participation in community festivals, fairs and expositions. To schedule Community Conversations, CMAP collaborated with community leaders, community-based and professional organizations and groups, agencies and institutions (such as libraries and institutions of higher learning) to provide opportunities for the general public to learn more about the *GO TO 2040* campaign and share their concerns about the region. There was no cost to participate in a Community Conversation and staff worked with existing community resources to spread the word about the meetings. CMAP also implemented a database of names and e-mail addresses from Community Conversations to generate invitations to local *Invent the Future* workshops using zip code information.

Residents' participation in Community Conversations enabled them to learn more about CMAP and the *GO TO 2040* campaign. After introducing the agency and the planning process of the

GO TO 2040 comprehensive plan, staff engaged in meaningful exchanges with participants. The kind of information collected at these meetings primarily focused on how residents perceived current local conditions and needs for the future of their communities and the region.

Participants were encouraged to share thoughts and comments in an intimate atmosphere with others as well as individual comment forms. Community Conversation questions included: *What works well in your community? What are the challenges in your community? What works well in our region? What are the challenges in our region?* Responses were recorded using a variety of methods including post-it notes submitted by participants, flip-charts covered by a staff member and staff notes. Staff also collected anonymous questionnaires where possible to better understand the demographic information of participants. Finally, participants were encouraged to sign up for the weekly CMAP e-blast sent out by the CMAP Executive Director to remain engaged in the process.

This report summarizes the information gathered from the CMAP Community Conversations that took place from January 2008 through May 2009. Each meeting identified issues, concerns, and new ideas about the future of our region. The public comments generated at Community Conversations allowed us to identify and prioritize the region's most critical challenges, successes, and preferences for the *GO TO 2040* plan (including investment and development decisions for the next thirty years) and give policy makers and transportation service providers a source of data about their progress toward achieving the regional vision. The information below is based on a study of the individual reports generated at each meeting.

Duration of Community Conversation effort: January 2008 through May 2009 (17 months)

Total number of Community Conversation participants: 1,843

Total number of municipalities represented: 43

Total number of Community Conversations: 102 meetings

Total number of meetings available in another language: 21 (19 Spanish, 2 Korean)

Table 1: Demographic Information from 300+ voluntary anonymous responses

Sex	Number of Responses
Male	112
Female	149
Age	Number of Responses
70+	21
60-69	49
50-59	53
40-49	47
30-39	21
21-29	27
20 or younger	31
Ethnicity/Race	Number of Responses
Asian	3
African American	56
Latino	40
American Indian	1
White, non Hispanic	200
Other	4
Country of Birth	Number of Responses
USA	190
Another Country	15
Annual Household	Number of Responses
\$0 or with assistance	1
\$5,000-20,000	13
\$20,000-30,000	5
\$30,000-40,000	16
\$40,000-50,000	17
\$50,000-60,000	16
\$60,000+	95

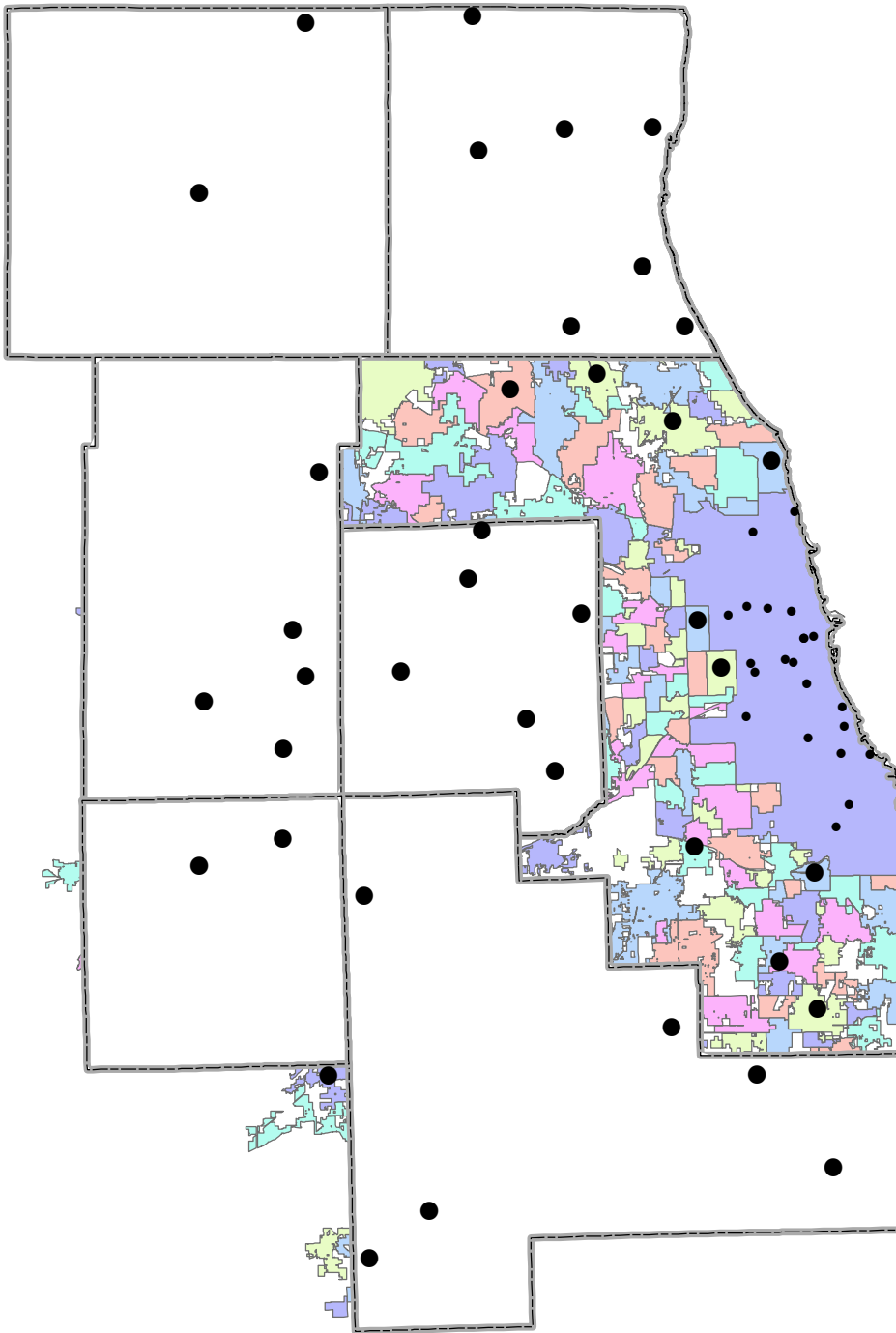
Table 2: Municipalities represented (in order of number of meetings in each municipality):

Chicago	37
Aurora	6
Elgin	5
Chicago Heights	4
Antioch	2
Beecher	2
Cicero	2
Elmhurst	2
Evanston	2
Gurnee	2
Palos Heights	2
Riverdale	2
Warrenville	2
Waukegan	2
Yorkville	2
Batavia	1
Bloomington	1
Braidwood	1
Buffalo Grove	1
Darien	1
Deerfield	1
Downers Grove	1
Flossmoor	1
Geneva	1
Glenview	1
Grayslake	1
Lake Forest	1
Minooka	1
North Aurora	1
Oak Park	1
Olympia Fields	1

Oswego	1
Palatine	1
Plainfield	1
Richmond	1
Richton Park	1
River Forest	1
Riverwoods	1
Roselle	1
University Park	1
Wheeling	1
Wilmington	1
Woodstock	1

Map 1: Community Conversations in the Region

The diamond (◊) identifies the municipality in which at least one Community Conversation was held.



Summary of Community Conversations

The *GO TO 2040* Regional Vision helped to shape the direction of the Community Conversations by introducing an organized way of discussing the topic areas covered by the comprehensive plan. The results from the Community Conversations are described below using the general topics outlined in the Regional Vision. Also included in the summaries below are quotations from participants, where available, to directly demonstrate individuals' specific concerns and issues for the future direction of the region.

I. Natural Environment

Issues concerning the natural environment were especially popular in Lake and Kendall counties. Still, residents throughout the seven counties expressed concern for many areas and conveyed an interest in exploring alternatives to ensure our region thrives in the future.

Residents expressed the importance of conserving water resources as the region grows, as well as investigating the quality of our water resources, throughout the region as we prepare for the increased population in the future. Additional water issues that were discussed included managing flooding and storm water management. For example, one participant shares "There needs to be more discussion about how water and air quality are affected by congestion and development. There needs to be more linking between the environment and health." (Buffalo Grove Village Hall, Buffalo Grove, Lake County).

Efforts to educate the general public were seen as pivotal in sharing the information about our region's limited resources. As a planning agency, some residents looked to CMAP as the agency that could help promote sustainable efforts throughout Northeastern Illinois. Issues like clean energy use, "green" technologies and environmental health were important to some participants. For example, one resident states: "[The] public needs to be educated on sustainability. It is a collective effort, but a lot of people need to first know how they can help on a daily basis" (Kendall County Historic Courthouse Community Conversation, Yorkville, Kendall County). Other issues focusing on resources included enforcing efforts to recycle in all of the region's communities.

In general, the region's residents value open spaces and open lands. The importance of conserving open spaces, green spaces and parks served to help promote the well-being of communities, not only promoting health but also making communities more desirable in which to live. One important goal should be to "preserve open spaces and plan appropriate development around them" (Plainfield Community Conversation, Plainfield, Will County). Efforts to preserve and sustain agricultural areas in the region were also supported in many communities. Many residents who lived in close proximity to parks and forest preserves take advantage of the activities available in these areas, including walking, biking and generally appreciating the natural environment. In some meetings, residents expressed an interest in connecting existing green areas to emphasize the need for open spaces and parks. One

resident shared: “[We need] Better use of vacant land: more community gardens, parks and open spaces.” (Department of Geography and Environmental Sciences, Northeastern Illinois University, Cook County).

II. Social Systems

Most Community Conversations discussed housing and education, areas that are prominent in the social systems theme. In particular, the City of Chicago, Cook and Kane counties seemed to discuss these issues more than other counties, although all counties expressed concern for housing and education circumstances in their communities.

With respect to housing, many residents expressed frustration at the lack of safe and affordable housing. For example, one resident explains how increased living prices force some families to live in overcrowded housing; the resident explains that there is a “need to have additional family members living in their home in order to pay their monthly rent payment or mortgage.” (Family Focus Community Conversation, Aurora, Kane County). In addition, some communities experienced increased pricing on homes and were seeing “increased gentrification in the area,” which can oftentimes impact the “feel” of the community (Gary Comer Youth Center Community Conversation, Chicago, Cook County). Additional efforts were also needed in some communities to deal with the foreclosure crisis, increased crime in some communities due to abandoned building and vacant lots, as well as the preservation of historic housing. The need for programs to keep people in their homes was emphasized to promote healthy communities.

In addition, some residents expressed concern of the building of new homes, especially due to the current state of the housing market. However, the housing issue was significant when it was compared to places of employment. One resident recognized that there is a “lack of housing near workplaces” (Fox River Ecosystem Partnership Community Conversation, Elgin, Kane County). The imbalance between homes and jobs is an issue throughout the region and should be addressed.

The importance of education was of interest, especially since many communities expressed a concern to provide the best education possible for all the children in our region. Schools and education opportunities need to be improved in many communities, which could positively impact the development of a talented workforce. Some residents expressed their frustration of the obstacles preventing them to obtain an education: “I want to go to college, but do not have the money or transportation to do it” (SouthStar Services Community Conversation, Chicago Heights, Cook County). Additional concerns included providing additional educational opportunities for students in green technologies to help prepare the youth to contribute to future economies in the region. Overall, residents wanted to ensure that our region’s youth have access to places where they can learn about the region, including parks, after-school centers, museums, and other locations.

III. Economy

This area includes of topics such as economic development, workforce and human capital, and impacts of economic growth (such as crime, health and other human and community development issues). The economy was discussed frequently in Cook, Kane and Will counties, as well as the City of Chicago.

The importance of sustaining and creating local jobs was important for the region's residents. One resident shared: "Local jobs need to be expanded where possible, especially trains, unions, blue-collar jobs, truck drivers, and schools" (Wilmington Public Library District Community Conversation, Wilmington, Will County). In addition, the possibility for new industries, such as local food production, were heard: "Urban farming is gaining momentum and it is valuable to start increasing the efforts of reaching out to restaurants in the South Shore area to enable the production of local foods" (South Shore Public Library, Chicago, Cook County).

One of the common topics that emerged in some communities was the need to develop a better workforce for the future. This requires investing in the education of the next generation of workforce, where "more education programs for youth [are needed] to prepare them for the work force." (Casa Central Community Conversation, Chicago, Cook County). Similarly, the region's residents noted a need to sustain and create opportunities for reinvestment within our communities and promoting business growth within our region (versus Wisconsin and Indiana); for example, "because Antioch is right near the Wisconsin border, the biggest competitor is Wisconsin...since services and goods were being used in Illinois, the companies should be based in the same state" (Antioch Public Library Community Conversation, Antioch, Lake County).

Some residents shared their hope that their community would reinvest to bring needed services nearby. Reinvestment in local communities was important to many communities throughout the region: "[There are] not enough local employment opportunities. [The region] Need[s] increased opportunities sustained in existing city centers." (Leave No Child Inside Faith-Based Advisory Group, Representatives from all counties). For some, reinvestment in their own communities was key to its economic success so it is important to promote investment opportunities and allow the community residents to be involved in the improvement of their communities. One way to do this, according to a participant, is to support economic development opportunities and incentives to be "equally distributed to small/new entrepreneurs" (Gail Borden Community Conversation, Elgin, Kane County). Furthermore, another participant voiced the need to support such localized efforts, stating: "Economic development is the beginning point for other opportunities in the community and ties in to many of the other topics...the town center is an important development center but also links to the railway (transportation) and the need to expand human services." (Indian Trails Public Library, Wheeling, Lake County).

To address the issue of safety in some of our communities, Englewood participants “believe that this requires both a legislative and a ‘civic engagement’ response that has government and community working together.” (Imagine Englewood If Community Conversation, Chicago, Cook County). Other communities also expressed the need for increased community efforts to safety issues in the region; for example, one participant shared that “There is a need for violence prevention programs and educational alternatives for youth...[and] they should be located at existing schools, parks, and cultural centers.” (Little Village Environmental Justice Organization, Chicago, Cook County). Other social needs include health, a need especially important among the older adult population and those who will be older in 2040.

IV. Transportation

Especially in DuPage, Lake and McHenry counties, transportation was an area of concern. Participants expressed interested in many modes, including driving, transit, biking, and walking.

Residents were interested in utilizing cleaner alternatives to getting around the region as well as better connecting the region’s communities through a public transit system (especially outside of Chicago). Participants noted that “Transportation is largely car-based [and the] availability of high speed public transportation and connecting regionally would be attractive.” (Leave No Child Inside Faith-Based Advisory Group, Representatives from all counties). In one community conversation, the majority of the comments supported “providing more options for alternatives to automobiles through public transit options like light rail and water taxis [and the support for] more incentives for car pooling and the restriction of [Sport Utility Vehicles]” (Richmond Township Community Conversation, Richmond, McHenry County). Other comments suggest regional efforts to improve existing transportation locations; for example: “We need to retrofit older communities to meet modern needs, including multimodal, modern roadways.” (Village of Palatine, Palatine, Lake County).

In addition, there is a need to provide accessible options for people with special needs and ensuring the safety of public transportation users. For example, one meeting conducted by SouthSTAR Services (an organization that provides choices and opportunities for persons with disabilities) revealed that “a few of the participants had mobility problems and said that it is difficult to use some public transportation. One stated that the train is hard to use since she is in a wheelchair, she wished it was easier for her, she would use it more often” (SouthSTAR Services Community Conversation, Chicago, Cook County). Public transportation is an important part of a community, and some residents called for increased public transportation options near community centers (such as colleges, hospitals, libraries, etc.) throughout the region.

Community Conversation participants also wanted to see a decrease in the dependence of driving by promoting public transportation. There were some challenges, however. For example, “[There is] no public transportation in the suburbs. Public transportation [is needed] from suburb to suburb to reduce emissions” (Warrenville Public Library District, Warrenville, DuPage County). For motorists, concerns included: decreasing the amount of congestion on existing roads, making the roads safer (free of potholes and keeping the roads clean when snowing) and addressing the safety and traffic concerns at railroad crossings. Congestion was an issue for many communities in the collar counties, especially at peak times of driving. One resident says the region’s leaders “need to organize roadways better to maximize traffic flow” (Plainfield Community Conversation, Plainfield, Will County).

Alternative modes of transportation were also explored. Participants discussed biking and walking as options to get around the region, but many included the need to make these alternatives more widely used and safer. Additional comments point to improving infrastructure in some communities where some areas are “lacking sidewalks to new commerce on outer fringes of community.” (Leave No Child Inside Faith-Based Advisory Group, Representatives from all counties). Many participants suggested increasing the number of bike paths and bike racks to support biking as a viable transportation alternative, both in their communities and within the region. One stated: “The bike paths should be expanded to the downtown and transportation hubs to provide alternatives to get to the train and/or destinations.” (Indian Trails Public Library, Wheeling, Lake County).