Looking to add teeth to planning: New agency seeks a law to help it govern growth
Crain's Chicago Business
October 16, 2006

Bob Tita

A new Chicago-area transportation and land use planning agency is trying to figure out how to be relevant without being onerous.

In the spring, the Illinois General Assembly created the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP) to replace both the Chicago Area Transportation Study (CATS) and the Northeast Illinois Planning Commission (NIPC). The two agencies had existed for decades but were scarcely known beyond public policy circles. That's because they were largely toothless when it came to curbing the haphazard development that causes traffic-choked roadways, overcrowded schools and other undesirable consequences.

Proponents of the new agency hope for better. CMAP's 15-member board released a report in September that is expected to become the basis for legislation next year that would put some muscle behind the agency's regional land use plans and transportation priorities.

Such plans in the past have been routinely disregarded, as municipal officials exert their authority to make decisions about zoning and land use in their towns. The new agency faces the same legal obstacles as CATS and NIPC. Under pressure from municipal officials, lawmakers in the spring insisted the bill creating CMAP avoid anything that could be construed as giving the new agency control over land use decisions.

"We went as far as we could go and not be overly prescriptive," says James LaBelle, deputy director of Chicago Metropolis 2020, the civic-business group that spearheaded the creation of CMAP. "But more needs to be done."

carrot-and-stick approach

Next spring, the new agency intends to push the Legislature for the authorization to use carrot-and-stick approaches to persuade municipalities and counties to adhere to regional plans. Municipalities that choose to disregard designated open spaces, for example, could lose state money for roads or other infrastructure projects.

"Does it make sense to spend state capital dollars for things that don't meet the regional plan?" says CMAP Executive Director Randy Blankenhorn. "We think there are incentives out there that can get communities to think twice."

As the successor to the Chicago Area Transportation Study and Northeast Illinois Planning Commission, CMAP is already involved in doling out state and federal money for roads and transit projects.

But some local officials worry the new agency will never be able to devise regional plans that every municipality will want to follow.

"I hate to be a naysayer, but there are different philosophies on growth," says Sugar Grove Village President P. Sean Michels, whose town's growth strategies have been at odds with Kane County's land use plan. "We're somewhat suspicious of a governing body like that."