

**National Association of Regional Councils Major Metro Roundtable:
Leveraging HUD's Sustainable Communities Initiative**
Sunday, February 11, 2018

Remarks by Joseph C. Szabo, Executive Director, Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning

Thank you for inviting me to be a part of this panel this afternoon.

The Sustainable Communities Initiative helped the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, or CMAP, launch a Local Technical Assistance program in 2010 that today is indispensable to the Chicagoland region. It is now a fundamental element of our DNA.

A bit of background on CMAP. We are the comprehensive planning agency and Metropolitan Planning Organization serving 8.5 million residents living in 284 communities and seven counties of northeastern Illinois. We were created by state statute in 2005, by merging two pre-existing planning agencies in our region: the Chicago Area Transportation Study, or CATS, which did transportation planning; and the Northeastern Illinois Planning Commission, or NIPC, which did land use planning.

In their own ways, CATS and NIPC addressed aspects of regional planning. But individually their work didn't set forth a comprehensive plan for the region – and it was less than optimal for coordinating land use with transportation. CMAP was charged with the responsibility to do just that—and to integrate transportation and land use planning with housing, economic growth, water resource management, community development, and environmental issues.

CMAP's first major deliverable was GO TO 2040, a long-term, comprehensive regional plan unlike any the Chicago region had ever developed. It was adopted in October of 2010. GO TO 2040 earned a number of national awards, in part because we, and our partners, have taken implementing the plan as seriously as we did developing it.

The LTA program is the hallmark of our implementation efforts. It was launched the day after GO TO 2040 was adopted, with the support of a \$4.25 million Sustainable Communities Regional Planning grant. This is exactly the type of coordinated support that we believe to be critical for addressing today's challenges.

From its origins, the LTA program has been a collaborative effort. Along with CMAP, a consortium comprised of dozens of government, philanthropic, and civic groups submitted its originating grant request. And those groups continue to be strong partners today in doing—and in some cases, helping to fund—the work in our LTA efforts.

The purpose of LTA then – as it remains today – is to increase the capacity of communities to implement their own local goals consistent with the region’s plan. And this is critical to CMAP’s success. While we have the responsibility to plan comprehensively for the region, the power to implement remains vested with local communities.

So, the LTA program coordinates the technical assistance resources available in our region – and brings these resources to bear to solve specific challenges at the local level. Projects focus on the intersection of housing, land use, and transportation, with particular attention to multimodal transportation. Applicants are encouraged to include other priorities of the regional plan as well, such as energy and water conservation, economic growth, and stormwater management.

To date, the LTA program has assisted communities on nearly 200 local projects that have put the regional plan’s recommendations to use in the real world. From each one of these experiences, our staff learns and grows. We develop new relationships with communities and local businesses, and strengthen relationships with our governmental partners. And, we engage local communities and their citizens in understanding the benefits of acting as one region, even as they maintain their own unique local characteristics.

Since the program’s beginnings, we’ve expanded our initial focus to include projects that improve municipal capacity with an increasing priority placed on higher-need communities. We’ve also encouraged communities to submit joint applications, to address issues that go beyond one municipality’s borders and to foster intergovernmental collaboration. Some examples:

One of our inaugural LTA projects was a sustainability plan for the Village of Park Forest, located 35 miles south of downtown Chicago. It covers topics related to the three E’s– environment, economy, and equity. Numerous milestones have been achieved by the Village, including the receipt of a coveted 3-star rating by the STAR Community Rating System in June 2015 – making Park Forest only the second community in Illinois to achieve this certification. The Plan itself won a Sustainability Award from APA-Illinois and an award for Best Town Plan from CNU-Illinois. In 2012, the Village secured a grant from the Chicago Community Trust to hire a Sustainability Coordinator, who implemented many recommendations of the Plan over a two-year period.

Based on the success of the Sustainability Plan, our LTA work has further assisted Park Forest with a Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan, adopted in 2014; and an update of the village’s zoning and subdivision regulations, adopted in December 2017. This Unified Development Ordinance includes zoning and subdivision regulations that advance both the Sustainability Plan and the Bike-Ped Plan.

Many of the ordinance’s sustainability-related requirements are the first-of-their-kind in our region. For example, the subdivision regulations include requirements for “complete and green streets,” to ensure that new roads suit the needs of all users and also incorporate stormwater management features. Through our LTA program, Park Forest is leading by example, and contributing to numerous GO TO 2040 policy recommendations such as:

- creating model ordinances and codes;
- pursuing coordinated investments;
- and managing stormwater in new developments.

Another example of our work in the Region was a Central Business District Plan for Riverside, Illinois. Adopted in 2013, the plan has helped the community attract new businesses to revive its transit-oriented downtown—which also achieves a critical recommendation of GO TO 2040: encouraging development in existing communities where infrastructure is already available.

Together, we created a roadmap for key implementers, and kept them informed and accountable throughout the process. We broke inertia by finding ways to have early, visible accomplishments. Furthermore, Riverside also took the important step of adjusting its committee structure and budget to align with the plan and pave the way for successful implementation.

Both Riverside and CMAP have stayed the course, knowing that much of our planning work wouldn’t show results for several years. We both remain committed to being transparent with the public about the challenges and successes. These elements – along with our commitment to advancing projects that promote coordinated planning and improve municipal capacity – perfectly sum up why the LTA program has become indispensable.

In 2015, CMAP began work on ON TO 2050, the region’s next comprehensive plan. Though not slated for adoption until October of this year, our staff is already working on what we can get done the day after the plan is adopted. LTA will continue to be central to those implementation efforts.

Building on GO TO 2040, ON TO 2050 will promote the three principles of Resilience, Inclusive Growth, and Prioritized Investment. Our Inclusive Growth recommendations will focus on connecting all people and communities to economic opportunity—for the entire region’s benefit. A continued focus of LTA efforts on communities with the greatest needs will be integral to furthering this principle.

Our LTA work will continue to embody the Sustainable Communities Initiative principles of bringing diverse voices into the planning process, and integrating housing,

transportation, infrastructure and environmental goals. We're living in an era of fewer and fewer state and federal resources—so those resources need to be directed to programs that are competitive and based upon comprehensive evaluative criteria. Programs such as the Sustainable Communities Initiative wisely consider the interconnectedness of transportation, land use, the environment, and economic development—and support local communities and regions to do the same.

The Local Technical Assistance program funded through the Sustainable Communities Initiative made our agency what it is today. It has been so integral to the successful implementation of our region's plan that when the originating grant ended, our board supported continuing the program via other funding sources.

Through its initial successes, the LTA program has proven that the power to implement our region's plan truly belongs with the 284 communities in our region. And this is just the type of program the federal government should focus on, to support thriving metropolitan regions, which drive our nation's economy. Thank you.