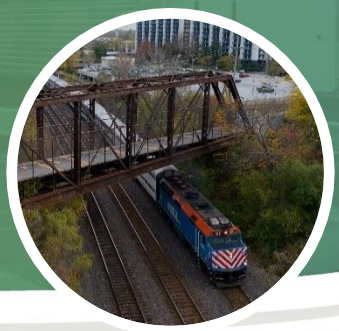
Emerging Priorities



RTP

2026
Regional Transportation Plan

February 2025

Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning

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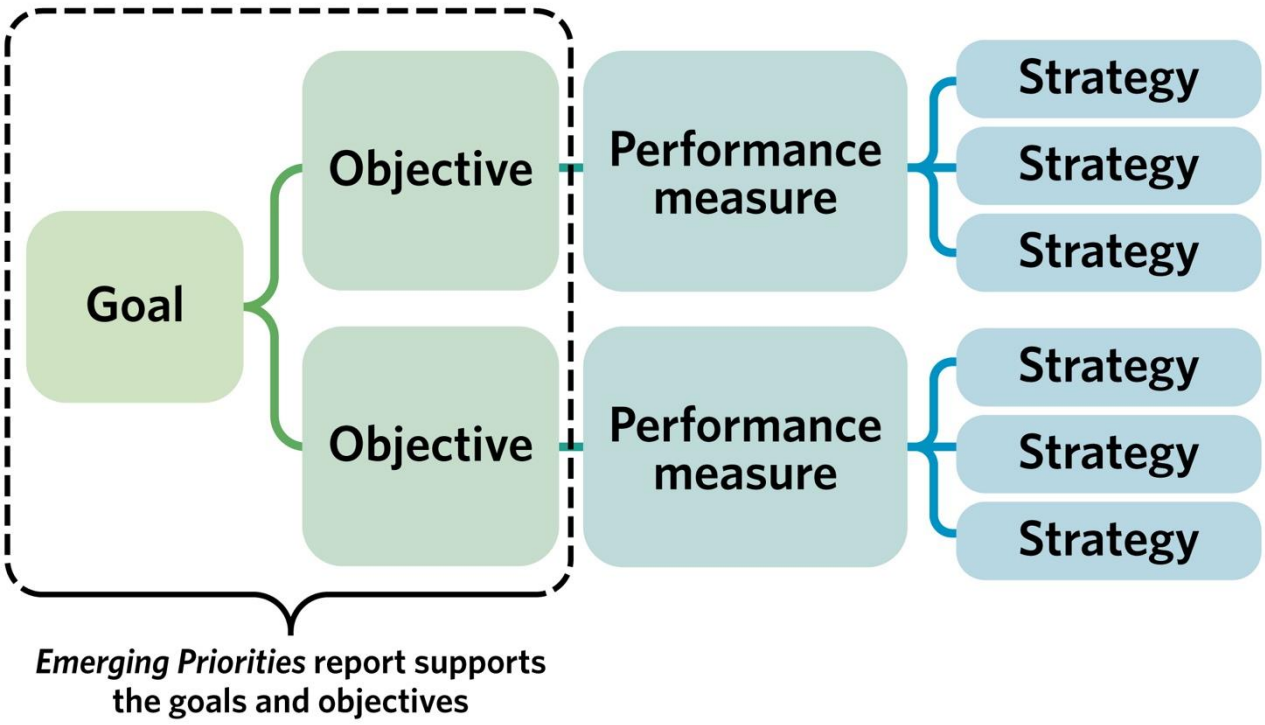
Introduction

The development of the 2026 Regional Transportation Plan (RTP) follows a performance-based framework that helps identify strategies to achieve regional priorities. This framework consists of four key elements – goals, objectives, performance measures, and strategies:

- **Goals** are broad statements that define the region's vision for transportation in alignment with ON TO 2050 and other regional plans.
- **Objectives** are distinct steps that support each goal and provide more specific areas of focus. Objectives help shape priorities and define what success looks like.
- **Performance measures** are quantifiable metrics that track progress achieving goals and objectives. Performance measures help evaluate performance, track trends, and ensure accountability.
- **Strategies** are actions to advance goals, achieve objectives, and meet performance measures. Strategies describe what actions are necessary to improve the transportation system, which may include specific investments or policy changes.

The process to develop the 2026 RTP begins with building consensus around outcomes the region wants to achieve. The *Emerging Priorities* report serves to achieve this crucial first step by outlining high-level goals and objectives that have emerged from research and stakeholder engagement. Upcoming phases of work — such as data analysis, policy development, and the identification of performance metrics — will help advance these priorities. As such, the report serves as a bridge between early research and the final plan.

Figure 1: Framework to guide RTP development



The goals and objectives outlined in this report reflect and reaffirm the priorities of ON TO 2050. They represent longstanding commitments in the region for the future of transportation. They are also informed by emerging priorities identified through activities conducted for the development of this report, which included facilitated discussions with partners, direct stakeholder engagement, and a thorough review of existing plans and research.

The process began with a comprehensive review of approximately 30 transportation plans adopted by entities at the federal, state, regional, and local levels, to establish a foundational understanding of the transportation outcomes the region wants to achieve, culminating in a memo that broadly summarized goals, objectives, and strategies.[1] This initial research supported subsequent presentations and conversations with stakeholders about potential goals for the 2026 RTP, including with the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP) Board and Committees, working groups, and individual transportation partners to further discuss their priorities. Finally, CMAP staff conducted an internal review of recent policy-related studies and plans, to capture and integrate relevant findings, recent trends, and emerging challenges.

This report marks a critical milestone in the development of the 2026 RTP. The next phase includes analyzing existing conditions and identifying performance measures. Later in the process, the region will collaborate to translate these priorities into detailed strategies and investment priorities that will guide the region's transportation future. Throughout each of these key phases, CMAP will continue to work closely with local governments, transportation agencies, businesses, and community organizations to help inform the 2026 RTP.

[1] Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, "Plan Inventory for the 2026 Regional Transportation Plan," May 20, 2024, https://cmap.legistar.com/View.ashx?M=F&ID=12978087&GUID=F141695E-F2D5-4ABA-8F1C-675FED4D4A68.

2026 RTP emerging priorities

The 2026 RTP builds on the vision established in ON TO 2050, which set the overarching principles of inclusive growth, resilience, and prioritized investment. Through regional collaboration and a shared vision for tomorrow, the 2026 RTP sets the following goals and objectives:

Strengthen connections between people and places

- Improve reliability and manage congestion
- Improve incident detection and management
- Expand multimodal access
- Achieve universal ADA accessibility

Prioritize safety and public health

- Advance Safe System Approach policies and practices
- Prioritize speed management
- Improve the safety of active transportation infrastructure
- Foster public health

Mitigate pollution and invest in resilient infrastructure

- Reduce pollution from the transportation sector
- Improve the resilience of infrastructure vulnerable to extreme weather
- Protect natural resources

Support economic prosperity and inclusive growth

- Leverage the transportation system to support local development goals
- Prioritize multimodal access to regional employment and economic centers
- Promote the efficiency of the national freight network in the region
- Foster a high quality of life in communities adjacent to freight activity

Strategically govern, fund, and preserve the transportation system

- Fund the preservation of the existing system
- Prioritize projects that maximize benefits
- Maintain and expand revenue sources
- Facilitate government collaboration
- Prepare for emerging technology

The remainder of the report discusses each of the five goals listed above in more detail, describing research findings and their potential implications in the 2026 RTP.

The 2026 RTP is grounded in the need to ensure that all communities in northeastern Illinois benefit from transportation investments and policies. It acknowledges that the transportation system should provide safe, reliable, and affordable travel options for all residents – regardless of race, income, ability, or age. Consequently, the 2026 RTP will prioritize improvements that address disparities in access to jobs, education, healthcare, and other essential services. It will also meaningfully engage communities that have been disproportionately affected by past transportation decisions, ensuring their voices help shape the region's future. Given the broad and interconnected nature of this topic, disparate impacts are a primary consideration for each goal. Upcoming data analysis will explore this topic further, and corresponding engagement activities will ensure that affected communities have the opportunity to provide input. This approach ensures that the RTP development process is both data-driven and rooted in the lived experiences of people throughout the region.

Strengthen connections between people and places

Transportation, first and foremost, serves to connect people and places. Northeastern Illinois has a vast and extensive transportation system spanning all modes of travel. How well this system works depends on three key concepts: mobility, connectivity and accessibility. Mobility refers to the ability to travel efficiently from one place to another, often measured by speed and ease of movement. Connectivity describes how well different parts of the transportation network are linked, ensuring seamless travel between destinations. Accessibility, however, goes beyond movement—it focuses on how easily people can reach jobs, schools, healthcare, and other essential services. While increasing mobility can help improve accessibility, simply moving vehicles faster does not always create better access to opportunities. Strengthening connections between people and places requires working towards a balance of mobility, connectivity and accessibility, which can, in turn, promote health and safety, foster environmental sustainability, support economic prosperity, and more.

As the region recovers from the pandemic's impact on travel patterns and transit ridership, strengthening these connections has become even more critical. Initiatives like Mobility Recovery, the Plan of Action for Regional Transit, and RTA's Transit is the Answer have emphasized the need for stronger, financially secure transit while reimagining how we move throughout the region.[2] Emerging transportation technology, micro-mobility, and shared mobility (e.g., e-bikes, scooters, and carsharing) will continue to change how we move in the coming decades, introducing new considerations for transportation planners.

Improve reliability and manage congestion

Congestion remains a major challenge for the region, increasing travel costs, delaying goods movement, reducing overall mobility, and impacting emissions and safety. Addressing congestion requires a strategic approach that manages demand and improves system reliability — a priority identified by transportation partners across the region. While peak-hour congestion is a persistent issue, nonrecurring delays caused by crashes, weather, and

[2] Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, "Mobility Recovery," January 2023, https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/88db4e4032674cdd893908446329f229; Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, "Plan of Action for Regional Transit," December 2023, https://cmap.illinois.gov/wp-content/uploads/Plan-of-Action-for-Regional-Transit_Dec2023.pdf; Regional Transportation Authority, "Transit is the Answer," https://transitistheanswer.org/.

construction further contribute to unpredictable travel times, affecting all modes of transportation.

For a thriving metropolitan region with significant economic activity and diverse travel needs, congestion will always remain a challenge. Furthermore, the causes of congestion vary widely across the region on different types of facilities and in different land use contexts, and as such, strategies should be tailored appropriately. However, there are opportunities for transportation stakeholders to collaborate on minimizing non-recurring delays and increasing the efficiency of the transportation system. Intelligent Transportation Systems (ITS) applications—including traffic signal modernization, transit signal priority, and active traffic management—can provide significant gains towards more reliable travel.

Managing congestion requires implementing solutions that are based on data and performance, and that will provide long-lasting reliability and efficiency improvements. An important factor to consider when expanding road capacity is induced vehicle travel, which refers to the increase in driving that occurs when travel becomes faster and easier. In the long run, this can lead to more development in car-dependent areas and an overall increase in traffic volume and vehicle ownership. Because of these effects, transportation stakeholders have emphasized the need to carefully consider induced travel when evaluating strategies to manage congestion.

As the RTP development process moves forward, strategies for managing congestion and improving reliability – such as expanding transit service, improving bike and pedestrian options, and managing demand through pricing or operational improvements – will be organized into a tiered hierarchy, guiding the region towards a wholistic approach that prioritizes strategies that are most effective and in best alignment with regional goals. This approach will help ensure that solutions are right for their context, financially sustainable, and successful over the long-term.

Improve incident detection and management

Efficient incident detection and management is critical not only for enhancing safety but also for reducing congestion and improving system resilience. With the increasing frequency of extreme weather events, rapid response strategies are becoming even more essential to maintain mobility and ensure safety. There is a growing opportunity to use Intelligent Transportation Systems (ITS) technologies, active traffic management, and data-driven tools to detect and respond to incidents more quickly and effectively. By improving incident response coordination and leveraging technology, agencies can reduce crash-related delays, enhance emergency response times, and create a safer, more adaptive transportation system.

Expand multimodal access

Northeastern Illinois has a multimodal transportation system, meaning it provides multiple travel options – including driving, public transit, biking and walking – to meet the diverse needs of residents. Many people across the region rely on transit, sidewalks, and bike networks for

their daily trips, whether commuting to work, accessing services or traveling for leisure. However, the opportunities and challenges related to multimodal access vary across different parts of the region, shaped by land use patterns, development densities, and existing infrastructure.

The region includes a wide range of contexts, each with distinct transportation needs:

- Dense urban area, such as Chicago and some inner-ring suburbs, have well-developed transit systems, walkable neighborhoods and bike infrastructure, making multimodal travel a key part of daily life. In these areas, improving reliability, frequency and accessibility of transit – along with expanding protected bike lanes and pedestrian infrastructure – can make multimodal options more viable and convenient.
- Suburban communities feature a mix of transit-oriented districts, residential neighborhoods, and commercial corridors, where improving first- and last-mile connections to Metra stations, expanding Pace bus service, and adding sidewalks and bike infrastructure can make multimodal travel more practical and attractive.
- Rural and exurban areas tend to have limited transit access and longer travel distances, making driving the dominant mode. However, opportunities exist to expand on-demand transit services, improve regional bike connections, and implement infrastructure that supports safer walking and biking where feasible.

Expanding multimodal options gives travelers more flexibility and choice, improving access to jobs, schools, and other destinations. Increasing opportunities for travelers to shift away from single-occupancy vehicles reduces congestion, lowers emissions, and improves safety for all road users. The 2026 RTP will identify policies, strategies, and investments to expand multimodal access and ensure that people across the region have safe, reliable, and convenient transportation choices.

A financially sustainable system is central to expanding multimodal travel. The COVID-19 pandemic brought significant changes in travel patterns, leading to a sharp decline in public transit ridership and creating financial challenges for transit agencies. While emergency federal funding provided temporary relief, those funds are set to expire, and ridership has yet to return to pre-pandemic levels—resulting in an anticipated budget shortfall. Building on efforts such as Mobility Recovery, the Plan of Action for Regional Transit, and Transit is the Answer, the 2026 RTP will support long-term transit recovery and ensure that transit remains a reliable and viable option for communities across the region.

Achieve universal ADA accessibility

Ensuring the region's transportation infrastructure is accessible to all is essential, particularly as aging infrastructure presents challenges for mobility and connectivity. Under Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), public agencies must provide equal access to programs, services, and facilities, ensuring that individuals with disabilities can fully participate in and benefit from the transportation system. While CMAP continues to support local governments through education, technical assistance, and planning resources, the RTP provides an opportunity to advance ADA accessibility at the regional level. The plan will explore strategies to accelerate ADA compliance, improve access to transit and pedestrian infrastructure, and enhance mobility for all residents, reinforcing the region's commitment to an inclusive and well-connected transportation network.

Improving equity in transportation fees, fines, and fares

According to CMAP's *Improving Equity in Transportation Fees, Fines, and Fare* report, transportation costs represent a significant financial burden for many households, particularly for those with limited income. User fees, fines, transit fares and vehicle-related expenses often have a greater impact on lower-income residents. While there are beneficial programs in the region, such as the Illinois Tollway I-PASS Assist Program and the Regional Transportation Authority's Discounted Fare and Ride Free Programs, transportation costs are typically not adjusted based on ability to pay. Additionally, many individuals lack access to convenient transit or other transportation alternatives, leaving them with few options other than driving, which adds further costs related to fuel, maintenance, and vehicle ownership.

Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach that considers affordability, access, and systemwide improvements. Strategies that can help reduce cost burdens include expanding reduced fare programs, adjusting fees based on income, reforming traffic and parking fines, and improving multimodal travel options. These approaches, among others, will be explored further in the 2026 RTP to identify solutions that support affordability and access while maintaining a financially sustainable transportation system.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, many residents — particularly those in historically underserved communities — faced significant mobility challenges. The pandemic further highlighted and, in many cases, worsened these disparities. The 2026 RTP provides an opportunity to advance a more inclusive and resilient transportation network, strengthening connections between communities.

Prioritize safety and public health

Improving travel safety remains a top priority at all levels of government to reduce traffic-related injuries and fatalities. Plans across northeastern Illinois emphasize the need for safer roadways, improved infrastructure, and policies that protect all travelers, including pedestrians, cyclists, transit-users, and drivers. The urgency to address these issues has only grown, particularly in response to the increase in traffic fatalities occurring during the COVID-19 pandemic. Complete Streets and the Safe System Approach both provide frameworks for designing and operating roadways that prioritize safety for all users.[3] These strategies not only prevent crashes and save lives but also contribute to congestion management, improved air quality, and enhanced public health.

Advance Safe System Approach policies and practices

Across the United States, transportation agencies are increasingly adopting the Safe System Approach, which layers multiple strategies to reduce the likelihood of crashes and minimizes the severity of those that do occur. This approach is guided by several key principles: that death and serious injuries are unacceptable, humans make mistakes, humans are vulnerable, responsibility is shared, safety is proactive, and redundancy is critical. This shift in traffic safety culture represents a significant pivot away from past approaches that focused primarily on high-crash locations and vehicular safety.

Figure 2. The Safe System Approach, FHWA

The Safe System Approach is shaping planning efforts across the region, including the Safe Travel for All county safety action plans. The 2026 RTP presents an opportunity to further integrate these principles into the regional transportation planning process.

[3] Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, "Complete Streets," http://cmap.illinois.gov/focus-areas/planning/complete-streets/; U.S. Department of Transportation, "What Is a Safe System Approach," last modified January 14, 2025, https://www.transportation.gov/safe-system-approach.

Prioritize speed management

Managing vehicle speed is a critical component of improving roadway safety. Between the years 2015 and 2021, speed was a contributing factor in 34 to 43 percent of fatal crashes, resulting in approximately 370 to 460 speed-related deaths annually in northeastern Illinois.[4] Speed impacts safety in multiple ways, including reaction time, field of vision, kinetic energy, and crash severity. Recent trends show that crashes are becoming more severe, as more vehicles are now larger and heavier, a trend expected to continue with the increased adoption of electric vehicles.

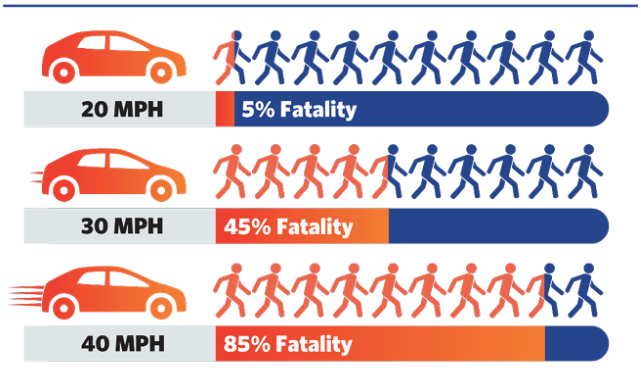
Strategies to reduce excessive speeds and enhance safety include:

- Improving roadway design to reduce speeding and minimize safety risks.
- Lowering speed limits in areas where people walk, bike and use transit.
- Encouraging safe driving behavior through education, policy updates, and equitable enforcement.

Effectively implementing these strategies will save lives and ensure a safer transportation network for all users.

Improve the safety of active transportation infrastructure

Bicyclists and pedestrians are among the most vulnerable roadway users. Small increases in speed significantly increase the likelihood of severe injuries or fatalities.



Source: National Transportation Safety Board (2017).

Figure 3. Higher speeds increase the likelihood of a pedestrian fatality, National Transportation Safety Board (2017)

Complete Streets solutions ensure that roads are planned, designed, operated, and maintained to accommodate all users regardless of age, ability, or travel mode. These principles are advanced through local and regional policy adoption, specific design treatments that enhance safety, and targeted investments in bikeway and pedestrian infrastructure. Communities throughout the region have expanded networks of active transportation facilities, yet there remains a need to accelerate

[4] Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, "Speed Management: Addressing our regional traffic safety crisis," June 2024, https://cmap.illinois.gov/wp-content/uploads/dlm_uploads/Speed-Management-Report_CMAP_2024.pdf.

implementation efforts. Advancing local bicycle and pedestrian safety plans will help ensure that these improvements are realized at scale and provide safe, connected travel options for all travelers.

Foster public health

Transportation and land use decisions play a critical role in public health outcomes, particularly for communities that have been disproportionately affected by pollution, traffic-related injuries, and limited access to safe and reliable transportation options. Throughout the region, historically underserved communities are more likely to experience higher exposure to air pollution, increased rates of asthma, and other respiratory conditions, as well as greater traffic safety risks due to infrastructure gaps, railroad crossings, and high-speed roadways.

Addressing these disparities is essential to creating a transportation system that improves public health and quality of life for everyone. Looking ahead, the 2026 RTP will include a disparate impact assessment to better understand how transportation-related burdens – such as pollution, infrastructure gaps and safety risks – disproportionately affect different communities across the region. This analysis will consider cumulative burden, recognizing how multiple environmental stressors, particularly those related to transportation, compound to negatively impact human health and wellbeing.

Mitigate pollution and invest in resilient infrastructure

ON TO 2050 establishes a strong foundation for fostering sustainability and resilience, emphasizing climate preparedness, water resource management, and development practices that protect natural resources.[5] In recent years, CMAP and its partners have advanced these goals through a range of efforts, from natural resources conservation to climate mitigation and adaptation strategies. As individuals and communities increasingly prepare for the effects of a changing climate — including more frequent flooding and extreme heat — many are also making commitments to reduce pollution from the transportation sector. Given the strong connection between transportation and environmental outcomes, the 2026 RTP presents an opportunity to further integrate sustainability and resilience into regional decision-making.

Reduce pollution from the transportation sector

ON TO 2050 sets a goal for "a region prepared for climate change" and includes an ambitious greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions reduction target of 80 percent below 1990 levels by 2050. As one of the largest sources of emissions in the region, ON TO 2050 recommends several transportation sector-focused strategies to reduce GHG emissions, including the increased adoption of electric vehicles, implementation of electric vehicle charging infrastructure, increased regional transit ridership through mode shift and other strategies, and expanded bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure.

Since the adoption of ON TO 2050 in October 2018, progress has been made in these areas. Agencies have expanded electric fleets, municipalities have developed and implemented active transportation plans, and research continues to identify strategies to reduce vehicle miles traveled (VMT). However, the 2019 regional GHG emissions inventory found that, while overall emissions have declined since 2010, transportation-related emissions have increased.[6]

While emissions are generated by a variety of transportation sources – including agricultural and construction vehicles and equipment, locomotives, maritime vessels, and aircraft – most originate from passenger cars and trucks. Given this reality, the RTP will play a key role in advancing emissions reduction strategies, informed by ongoing efforts such as the

[5] Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, "ON TO 2050," 138, October 2018, https://cmap.illinois.gov/regional-plan/goals/.
[6] Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, "Regional greenhouse gas emissions inventory," 2022, https://cmap.illinois.gov/wp-content/uploads/Greenhouse_Gas_Emission_Inventory_2022.pdf.

Comprehensive Climate Action Plan for Greater Chicago.

Key priorities for reducing pollution and improving air quality include:

- Expanding vehicle electrification across all modes and the provision of charging infrastructure, while ensuring that charging needs are met with clean energy sources.
- Encouraging mode shift by enhancing transit, biking, and walking options.
- Increasing collaboration between regional transportation planners and critical stakeholders, such as utilities, freight representatives, local municipalities, and others to support implementation of effective transportation decarbonization efforts.

The 2026 RTP will incorporate strategies to accelerate the adoption of electric and alternative-fuel vehicles, expand EV charging infrastructure, enhance transportation efficiency, and encourage mode shift to transit and active transportation.

Improve the resilience of infrastructure vulnerable to extreme weather

Beyond pollution mitigation, ON TO 2050 emphasizes the need to prepare for more extreme weather conditions by strengthening infrastructure. The urgency to adapt to a changing climate continues to grow as northeastern Illinois experiences more frequent flooding, extreme heat, and severe storms. These hazards have direct consequences for the region's transportation system, causing damage to infrastructure, travel disruptions, and safety risks.

Urban areas – particularly Chicago's south and west sides, suburban Cook, as well as Aurora, Elgin, Joliet, and Waukegan – demonstrate higher vulnerability due to stormwater challenges and heat exposure. However, every county in the region contains transportation infrastructure at high or very-high risk of flooding, making resilience a region-wide priority. The 2026 RTP will advance efforts to strengthen the transportation network's ability to withstand these impacts.

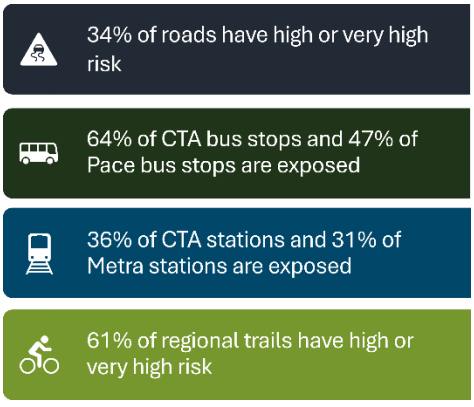


Figure 4. Flood risk results from the TRIP Risk-based Vulnerability Assessment.

CMAP's Transportation Resilience Improvement Plan (TRIP) is a key initiative that will identify and prioritize transportation assets most vulnerable to climate change. By assessing the risks to roads, bridges, bus stops, train stations, and rail lines, the region can take proactive steps to protect critical transportation infrastructure and minimize weather-related disruptions. The 2026 RTP will align with these efforts, supporting strategies to enhance resilience, improve emergency preparedness, and ensure long-term infrastructure reliability.

Protect natural resources

The region's approach to transportation planning plays a critical role in preserving and protecting natural resources. Stakeholders throughout northeastern Illinois have emphasized the importance of conserving water resources, preventing habitat fragmentation, preserving natural and agricultural lands, and more. As transportation infrastructure expands or is modernized, it is essential to balance mobility needs with environmental stewardship. The 2026 RTP will help guide the future of the regional transportation system in a way that supports mobility goals while safeguarding ecosystems that provide valuable environmental and quality of life benefits.

Support economic prosperity and inclusive growth

Northeastern Illinois' economy is powered by its extensive and interconnected transportation system. A vast network of roads, rails, and waterways connect millions of people with destinations that advance economic prosperity for local communities, the region, state, and nation. In addition to making connections for local residents, the transportation system also facilitates the economically impactful industry of travel and tourism. Furthermore, the region is a critical hub for goods movement, supporting $365 billion in domestic trade and $245 billion in international trade each year.[7] Looking ahead, the 2026 RTP will explore strategies to further leverage the region's transportation assets to support economic prosperity and inclusive growth.

Leverage the transportation system to support local development goals

The diverse communities of northeastern Illinois have unique economic and land use needs, shaped by local market conditions, industry composition, and transportation infrastructure. From the urban commercial core of downtown Chicago to the agricultural areas of Kendall County, the region has a spectrum of transportation-related needs and opportunities. Tailoring transportation strategies to the needs of specific communities can help maximize the impact of infrastructure investments.

Many communities face economic challenges linked to transportation gaps, including insufficient transit access, outdated infrastructure, and disconnected job centers. Accounting for unique local context is critical to identify effective solutions. For example, mitigating freight congestion in Will County warrants an approach distinct from facilitating transit access to newly residential areas in McHenry County. The 2026 RTP will explore approaches that align transportation planning with local development priorities, ensuring that investments support economic growth, job creation, and industry-specific transportation needs.

Prioritize multimodal access to regional employment and economic centers

ON TO 2050 reinforces the importance of investing within existing communities to strengthen economic opportunity. Infill development — leveraging existing transportation infrastructure to support growth — can promote broad, multimodal access to key economic destinations, such as major employers, commercial centers, and essential services. Communities across northeastern Illinois are actively seeking to attract new businesses and developments that can

[7] Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, "Emerging Priorities for ON TO 2050," October 2016, https://cmap.illinois.gov/wp-content/uploads/FY17-0016-Priorities-Report-Final.pdf.

serve as economic centers. While most development sites are accessible by car, transportation partners have emphasized the need to expand access via transit, biking, and walking to increase economic participation and manage congestion. The 2026 RTP will examine strategies to enhance multimodal connections to employment hubs, ensuring that workers and businesses alike benefit from a well-connected, efficient transportation system.

Promote the efficiency of the national freight network in the region

With its 30,000 miles of highways, 3,900 miles of rail, 100 miles of waterways, and multiple major airports, northeastern Illinois is a critical hub for freight movement.[8] Access to this extensive freight network is a major competitive advantage for industries such as manufacturing, construction, and retail trade. CMAP's ongoing development of the Regional Freight System Assessment found that – in 2023 and 2024 respectively – industries in the region used the freight network to transport goods collectively worth over a trillion dollars and provide more than 210,000 jobs.

While progress has been made in reducing rail and truck bottlenecks through efforts like the Chicago Region Environmental and Transportation Efficiency (CREATE) program, freight congestion remains a challenge. The 2026 RTP will identify opportunities to enhance the efficiency of freight operations, exploring investments and policies that support smarter logistics, infrastructure modernization, and operational improvements to ensure that goods movement remains a competitive strength for the region.

Foster a high quality of life in communities adjacent to freight activity

Freight movement is a key driver of regional economic growth, supporting jobs, businesses and the movement of goods throughout northeastern Illinois and beyond. The region's highways, rail lines, intermodal facilities, waterway and airports play an essential role in keeping supply chains efficient and ensuring businesses remain competitive. However, while freight infrastructure and activity bring economic benefits, they also create challenges for communities located near industrial and logistics hubs.

High levels of truck and rail traffic can result in noise pollution, degraded air quality and increased safety risks, particularly in areas with high residential densities, schools and other sensitive land uses. Truck congestion can contribute to wear and tear on local roads, while idling and emissions from diesel engines can have long-term public health and environmental impacts. Additionally, the movement of heavy freight vehicles through communities can create pedestrian and cyclist safety concerns, limiting mobility for those who walk, bike, or rely on transit. The 2026 RTP will explore strategies to balance freight efficiency with community well-

[8] Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, "Regional Strategic Freight Direction," February 2018, https://cmap.illinois.gov/wp-content/uploads/FINAL-Regional-Strategic-Freight-Direction-with-cover_2-6-18.pdf.

being by identifying solutions that reduce negative impacts while maintaining the economic benefits of freight activity.

Strategically govern, fund, and preserve the system

The region's extensive transportation network is a critical asset, but maintaining, modernizing, and operating this vast system requires sustained attention and investment. Much of our region's transportation infrastructure traces its origins back a century or more, reflecting its legacy as one of the nation's oldest systems – one that requires a significant level of continued investment. Alongside the significant need for system preservation, transportation agencies are also planning for new projects that address changing travel patterns and emerging challenges. Managing and funding the region's complex transportation system involves multiple levels of government, each with distinct responsibilities and jurisdictions. As the region looks toward 2050, there is an opportunity to strengthen the coordination, funding, and administration of transportation investments to support the long-term viability of the system.

Fund the preservation of the existing system

The transportation system in northeastern Illinois is one of the largest and most established in the nation, reflecting generations of investment in road, rail, waterway, and airport infrastructure. While this legacy provides the region with a robust transportation system, it also presents a growing maintenance backlog, as many critical assets are reaching the end of their useful life. In particular, the region has significant preservation needs for roads, bridges, rail, and transit facilities such as stations and vehicles. To protect the long-term viability of the system, it is essential to prioritize investment in maintaining and modernizing existing infrastructure.

To effectively manage maintenance needs, CMAP and its partners recognize the potential to improve asset management through better data collection and analysis. Enhanced data and decision-making tools can help agencies prioritize the most cost-effective investments – but these resources are not fully integrated into programming processes, ultimately limiting their impact. Given the scale of infrastructure reinvestment needed over the coming decades, it will be critical for the 2026 RTP to develop strategies that prioritize achieving a state of good repair across the region's transportation system.

Prioritize projects that maximize benefits

Strategic capital investments play a key role in shaping the future of the region's transportation system. In recent years, transportation agencies have strengthened collaboration to identify regionally impactful projects that should be prioritized for state and federal funding. For example, transportation partners have coordinated regularly to publish materials that highlight priority projects for grant funding. This collaboration has continued into project implementation as well; CMAP, IDOT, and the Chicago Transit Agency jointly invested in a process to establish a corridor development office for the I-290 Blue Line Modernization project. This coordinated approach to transportation investment should be expanded and reinforced to ensure that limited funding is directed towards projects that deliver the greatest regional benefits. The 2026 RTP will support this effort by evaluating Regional Capital Projects and complementary investment strategies that prioritize projects to advance regional goals.

Maintain and expand revenue sources

Achieving the region's vision for transportation requires sustainable and sufficient funding. However, in recent years, traditional revenue sources have not kept pace with rapidly rising costs. Some sources, such as the Motor Fuel Tax (MFT), have become less effective due to changes in vehicle fuel efficiency, leading to declining revenues. Similarly, the region's transit system is approaching a fiscal cliff, and securing sustainable funding is essential to its long-term viability.[9] While some transportation projects have benefitted from competitive discretionary funding at the state and federal levels, the regional system requires more stable and predictable revenue sources to support operations, maintenance, and modernization over the long term. The 2026 RTP will develop a financial plan to fund transportation projects through 2050, exploring innovative approaches to fill funding gaps and address emerging needs.

Facilitate government collaboration

Coordination between transportation agencies is essential for advancing regional priorities and ensuring that infrastructure investments are efficient and effective. Many transportation projects — particularly those improving multimodal connectivity — involve multiple jurisdictions that oversee different assets, such as sidewalks, roads, and transit routes. Opportunities exist to coordinate traffic operations with transit service to smooth traffic flow, avoid duplication, and provide a seamless traveler experience. Furthermore, projects that demonstrate multi-agency coordination may perform more competitively in applications for state and federal funding. The 2026 RTP will explore strategies to support strong collaboration among transportation partners to coordinate investments, align policies, and work together to

[9] Securing sustainable transit funding is explored in further detail in the "expand multimodal access" objective on page nine.

advance shared goals. Strengthening intergovernmental partnerships will be essential to continue delivering an integrated and well-functioning transportation system for the region.

Prepare for emerging technology

Advancements in transportation technology present both opportunities and challenges for the region's transportation system. Intelligent Transportation System (ITS) technologies and other technology-driven solutions have the potential to enhance safety, improve traffic flow, and increase efficiency across roadways and transit networks. For example, modernizing traffic signals represents a cost-effective strategy to optimize roadway performance, which should be prioritized before considering major roadway expansions.

As the transportation system integrates new technologies, such as vehicle automation, vehicle to vehicle communication, and vehicle infrastructure communication, it is essential to anticipate potential risks and ensure that systems remain secure and resilient. Cybersecurity is an emerging concern as more transportation functions shift online, requiring proactive strategies to safeguard critical infrastructure. The 2026 RTP will research emerging technologies and develop strategies to responsibly integrate new innovations into the regional transportation system, ensuring that technology adoption enhances efficiency while protecting public safety and security.

Looking ahead

The 2026 RTP presents an opportunity to reflect the transportation goals of communities across northeastern Illinois and chart a path to achieve them. This *Emerging Priorities* report outlines the key priorities that will guide the plan's development, serving as a foundation for further outreach, policy research, and strategy development.

CMAP is developing a series of policy briefs to explore critical transportation topics, expanding on the priorities identified in this report as well as federal requirements and input from regional partners. These briefs will address emerging technologies, innovative financing, transportation asset management, and other key issues. The findings from these policy briefs will further strengthen the region's understanding of critical transportation topics and provide the information needed to develop implementation strategies.

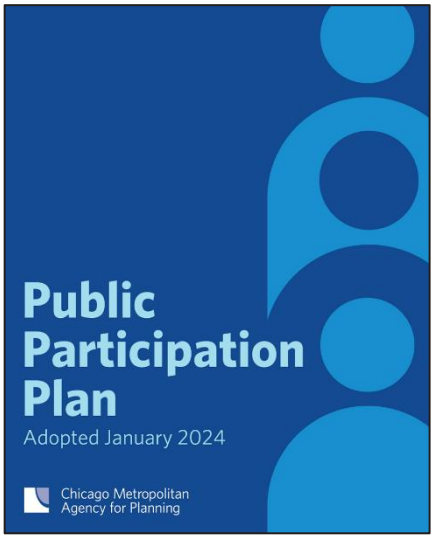


Figure 5. The 2026 RTP will advance and remain consistent with CMAP's recently updated Public Participation Plan.

In addition, CMAP will conduct extensive engagement throughout 2025 and early 2026 to further inform the development of the plan. This effort will build on the engagement activities that contributed to this report and will include:

- Public questionnaires to gather insights from people across the region.
- Resource group meetings with subject-matter experts and transportation partners.
- Briefings with agencies and community organizations to ensure alignment with local and regional priorities.
- Focused equitable engagement activities to elevate the voices of historically underrepresented communities.

The questionnaire, plan development materials, project details, and more will all be available on the project website, at engage.cmap.illinois.gov/2026-rtp.

The adoption and implementation of the 2026 RTP will strengthen our region, fostering greater connectivity and resilience. Guided by performance-based decision-making, the RTP will drive effective transportation solutions that enhance economic opportunities and improve quality of life for all. By advancing a vision that integrates mobility, economic vitality, and community well-being, the RTP will help build a more livable and prosperous northeastern Illinois for generations to come.

The Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP) is the region's comprehensive planning organization. The agency and its partners developed and are now implementing ON TO 2050, a long-range plan to help the seven counties and 284 communities of northeastern Illinois implement strategies that address transportation, housing, economic development, open space, the environment, and other quality-of-life issues.

See cmap.illinois.gov for more information.

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