



MEMORANDUM

To: Council of Mayors

From: CMAP Staff

Date: March 26, 2024

Subject: Regional planning approach update

Purpose: Background on the structure and benefits of a new approach to fulfilling CMAP's federal and state metropolitan planning responsibilities including the successor to ON TO 2050 and the 2026 regional transportation plan.

Action Requested: Information

Background

The Regional Planning Act ([70 ILCS 1707/](#)) requires CMAP to develop a regional comprehensive plan that integrates land use, transportation, and their relationships with economic development, the environment, air quality, energy consumption, and other issues impacting quality of life in northeastern Illinois. Per statute, the plan should guide the region's physical development and form the foundation for all planning in the region, with a special emphasis on the interactions between transportation and land use decisions.

As the designated metropolitan planning organization (MPO) for northeastern Illinois, CMAP is also mandated by federal regulations to develop and maintain a metropolitan transportation plan (MTP) that provide a comprehensive framework for transportation planning within the region. The MTP—also known as a regional transportation plan (RTP) or regional long-range transportation plan (LRTP)—outlines the long-term vision, goals, and strategies for the transportation system, addressing factors such as infrastructure needs, funding considerations, congestion management, safety improvements, and multimodal connectivity.

Since the agency was formed in 2005, it has fulfilled these state and federal responsibilities with the adoption of a single, large-scale regional comprehensive plan and its related update. Both GO TO 2040 (adopted in 2010) and ON TO 2050 (adopted in 2018) were the product of major, multi-year processes featuring extensive staff research, stakeholder engagement, and public outreach. Both award-winning plans helped the region to anticipate major challenges and opportunities, generate consensus on shared strategies, and evolve regional policy on difficult issues.

Staff have begun work on the next regional plan. This new plan will build on the successes of GO TO 2040 and ON TO 2050 while refining its approach in important ways. This memo describes key considerations of the new approach.

Learning from peer regions

To begin the scoping process, staff explored how peer agencies approach their comprehensive planning activities and found they rarely created one, large-scale plan that satisfies all state and federal responsibilities. Instead, similar agencies pursue a structure that allows multiple plans, adopted over time, to be considered together as the region's unified plan. Oftentimes, a "big picture" plan sets the macro-level direction that guides topic-specific plans on issues of regional concern. This is often referred to as a "vision and subplans" approach, examples of which are included below.

The **Metropolitan Council** (MetCouncil) is the metropolitan planning organization for the Minneapolis and St. Paul region in Minnesota. For decades, the MetCouncil has successfully implemented a vision and subplans approach which begins by developing an overarching vision plan—the most recent is known as "[Thrive MSP 2040](#)." This plan provides a long-term vision for the region's growth and development. The Metropolitan Council develops several subplans focusing on specific topic areas, such as transportation, housing, regional parks, and water resources, to address their state and federal planning responsibilities.

Serving the Seattle-Tacoma region in the State of Washington, the **Puget Sound Regional Council** (PSRC) has adopted a similar approach by developing a regional vision, called "[VISION 2050](#)," which provides a comprehensive vision for the region's growth and development. Informed by the regional vision, PSRC develops subplans focusing on transportation, economic development, and housing to translate the overarching vision into topic area specific policies and strategies.

The **Atlanta Regional Commission** (ARC) is the regional planning and metropolitan planning organization for the 11-county Atlanta region. ARC has established an overarching regional plan framework, called "[One Great Region](#)," that focuses on a three-fold vision: providing world-class infrastructure; fostering healthy, livable communities; and building a competitive economy. Informed by the regional plan framework, ARC develops subplans including a regional economic strategy, a healthy communities plan, and a regional transportation plan.

A new approach to regional planning in northeastern Illinois

CMAQ is now moving forward with a vision/subplans approach as it will provide numerous opportunities to strengthen regional planning in northeastern Illinois. Under this approach, CMAQ and regional partners can set a bold, new vision that builds upon the current plan's principles, policies, and goals, while refining comprehensive planning practices in important ways.

CMAQ's regional vision plan will build on the significant progress and direction provided by previous work, while creating more flexibility than the agency's previous quadrennial planning cycle. Many of the ON TO 2050's strategies and recommendations remain relevant in relation to the region's complex, lasting issues. However, a single plan represents a snapshot in time

that cannot evolve and adapt to new and evolving priorities. For example, climate action, housing coordination, or industrial strategies all require more dedicated and responsive planning than is feasible under the previous model. By implementing a regional vision, CMAP will work with our partners to define overarching strategic priorities and commitments that will guide a range of more detailed sub-planning activities over the next 5-10 years. Combined, the regional vision and regional subplans will serve as the region's comprehensive plan.

Anticipated benefits of transitioning to this approach

In addition to those already discussed, the vision/subplans approach has the potential to provide the following benefits:

Product improvements

- *Deeper analysis:* Topic-specific subplans enable the region to conduct in-depth analyses and assessments within each area, leading to a more thorough understanding of the challenges, opportunities, and potential impacts. This depth of analysis enhances the quality of decision-making and ensures that strategies are evidence-based and actionable.
- *More tailored solutions:* Different issue areas often require unique approaches and solutions. Having separate subplans allows the region to dig deeper and tailor strategies and policies to the specific needs and priorities of each topic area.
- *Enhanced public outreach and stakeholder engagement:* Developing a vision for the region provides an opportunity for high-level public outreach while developing subplans enables more extensive engagement with key stakeholders on curated topics. This approach would be geared to encourage meaningful and equitable participation from diverse stakeholders, fostering deeper collaboration and consensus-building.
- *Improved implementation and monitoring:* Having separate subplans facilitates implementation and monitoring efforts, as progress can be tracked and evaluated within each topic area. This allows CMAP and its partners to identify successes, challenges, and areas for improvement, and make data-informed adjustments as needed.

Process improvements

- *Flexibility and focus:* By having separate subplans, the region can maintain flexibility to address new and existing challenges or opportunities focused within specific topic areas, while staying aligned with an overarching regional vision. Additionally, topic area subplans would no longer be tied to the four-year update cycle of federal transportation planning requirements and could instead be updated on a cadence appropriate to each topic.
- *Breaking down planning silos:* A single comprehensive plan document requires an “all-hands-on-deck” approach to staffing, with subject matter experts focused on portions of the plan specific to their expertise. With subplans developed on different timelines, the agency will have an enhanced ability to deploy cross-functional and interdisciplinary teams.

- *Alignment with regional goals:* By developing subplans that are guided by the overarching vision for the region, the region can ensure alignment with our long-term goals and priorities. This coherence enhances the effectiveness and impact of the region’s planning efforts, leading to more sustainable and equitable outcomes.

Next Steps

CMAP staff will discuss this new approach with the CMAP Transportation Committee, MPO Policy Committee, and Board. Additionally, CMAP staff will consult with partners including IDOT, and Region 5 FHWA and FTA staff.

CMAP will begin developing a macro-level plan that will serve as the foundation for regional subplans. This “north star” will articulate long-term goals and aspirations while also identifying potential challenges and opportunities that could impede or accelerate regional progress. It will also establish the universe of subplans and related material to be delivered over time to support implementation of these big picture planning goals.

To meet federal requirements CMAP has started preparations to develop the 2026 Regional Transportation Plan (RTP). This plan will build on the mobility goals and strategies from ON TO 2050 and will guide multimodal transportation decision-making and funding allocation over a 20+ year horizon. By initiating the development of our RTP, we are taking proactive steps to ensure compliance with federal regulations and to address the transportation needs and priorities of our region in a comprehensive and strategic manner. The plan must be adopted by October 2026. Initial work includes procuring consultant support, establishing goals, conducting existing conditions research, updating administrative policies and procedures, and public outreach activities.

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