

Planning Chicago: A Century of Lessons

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“Make no little plans, for they have no magic to stir men’s blood and probably themselves will not be realized. Make big plans; aim high in hope and work” (Moore 1921). So said Daniel Burnham in 1909 when he exhorted Chicagoans to embrace his *Plan of Chicago* that called for a remaking of the city through massive public and private initiatives. He knew that plans are often made and just as often ignored, and the most important reason to support and follow through on urban planning initiatives is that costs grow higher while problems unaddressed get worse.

Burnham’s *Plan*, written with co-author Edward H. Bennett, succeeded in creating the momentum that resulted in Chicago’s marvelous lakefront parks, showcase museums, and linking bridges that led to northward retail growth across the Chicago River. While the successes of portions of Burnham and Bennett’s *Plan* are well-known, the areas where the plan were ignored show how costs grow and problems become more massive as time marches on.

Daniel Burnham was the most respected and well-known architect and planner of his day. He began his career in Chicago with his first partner, John Root, designing homes for prominent business leaders. They branched out to designing railroad depots and tall commercial buildings. Their 1890 Rand McNally building was the first skyscraper built with an all-steel frame, a technological breakthrough that made possible the dizzying heights of our tallest structures today. After the premature death of Root from influenza in 1891, Burnham rose to international notoriety due to his successful supervision of the design and planning of the 1893 Worlds Fair, the Colombian Exposition. Twelve million people visited the fair that summer in Chicago, a figure equal to half the population of the United States at that time (Smith, 2006).

After the fair, with his firm reorganized under the name D. H. Burnham and Company, Burnham relied on a variety of designers to take the place of his deceased original partner. His

firm went on to design such notable buildings as Union Station in Washington D.C. and the Flatiron building in New York. Burnham turned his attention to urban planning, creating plans for Cleveland, Ohio, Washington D.C., Manila in the Philippines, and San Francisco. The last and most comprehensive of his urban plans, written with his chief designer, Edward Bennett, was the 1909 *Plan of Chicago*. The force of Burnham's notoriety and prestige had much to do with the early successes of plan initiatives: improvements to Michigan Avenue north of the Chicago River; the creation of lakefront parkland, including Grant Park; the widening and creation of several important thoroughfares, including Roosevelt Road and Wacker Drive, and the construction of Chicago's Union Station (Smith, 2006).

The *Plan of Chicago* (Burnham & Bennett, 1993) also noted that it was necessary to address the problem of freight rail traffic running through the business center of the city; unfortunately, the warning went unheeded. Today, since nothing was done a century ago to address the problem, a freight train can take over 24 hours to travel the 30 miles from north to south through Chicago (Canadian National Railway, 2008). This example shows that valid planning initiatives need to be supported and enacted.

Currently, the city of Chicago is using a bid for the 2016 Olympics to jump-start many planning initiatives, hoping that the potential prestige of the games will convince state and federal politicians to fund mass transit and infrastructure improvements. MarySue Barrett, president of the nonprofit Metropolitan Planning Council, states, "The Olympics force you to be forward-looking in thinking. People need to think about it not as a one-time event but as a preparation for the next wave of residential and commercial investment and corporate relocation and expansion" (Krohe, July 2007, p. 50). Advocates of the Olympic bid are hoping that the

games will be the “Big Plan” that will unite state residents, business leaders, and politicians of both political parties behind the Chicago region’s needed infrastructure improvements.

Another current planning initiative, Chicago Metropolis 2020, hopes to create a regional planning board that will tie development to transportation improvements in order to allow population centers to have quick and affordable access to employment centers. Created by the Commercial Club of Chicago, an association of business people that also financed the Burnham/Bennett *Plan of Chicago* a century earlier, Chicago Metropolis 2020 argues that “traffic congestion, the jobs-housing imbalance, the concentration of the poor and minorities, and low-density sprawl” stand in the way of future investment and job creation (Knack, April 2004, p. 16). Fighting against regional planning authorities that routinely approve land use projects that do not consider transit needs, Metropolis 2020 CEO George Ranney, Jr. states, “Planning for transportation without also planning for development is like one hand clapping” (Knack, April 2004, p. 17).

Additionally, the city of Chicago’s green initiatives intend to make Chicago America’s greenest city by reducing greenhouse gas emissions, cleaning up brownfields for new urban business and residential growth, and fast-tracking permits for energy efficient buildings. The Chicago Center for Green Technology, built on a former dumpsite, serves as a model and research center for testing and implementing environmentally sound and energy efficient designs and systems. “It houses tenants that share a sustainable mission and serves as both a national model of environment-sensitive design and a resource for those wanting to learn more about sustainable technologies” (Zvenyach & Littmann, March 2006, p. 21). Mayor Richard J. Daley’s administration has planted over 500,000 trees along the city’s streets and in its parks. Since buildings use one-third of the energy consumed in the United States, the city has encouraged the

installation of “green roofs,” insulating rooftop foliage that decreases summer cooling and winter heating needs. A green roof on City Hall was installed in 2001, and since then, over 200 additional buildings have added green roofs covering 2.5 million square feet. The main goal of the city’s overall green initiative is to increase the energy derived from renewable sources to at least twenty percent of the city’s total consumption (Schneider, July 2006). The green initiatives, Chicago Metropolis 2020, and the 2016 Olympics bid all have worthwhile and attainable goals, but history shows that they face an uncertain future for attainment.

Any long delay in solving problems leads to increased expense and disruption later. The *Plan of Chicago* noted that the creation of outer freight rail beltlines around the densely populated part of the metropolitan area, along with freight warehouses and transfer yards along the course of the outer beltlines, would decrease the cost of freight handling. The *Plan* argued that these rail beltlines would be best constructed while the areas proposed for the increased freight traffic and yards were sparsely populated and available for purchase at low prices (Burnham & Bennett, 1993).

As we see from *Figure 1*, population growth in the counties affected by Canadian National’s current proposal has increased by a factor greater than nine from the 1910 to the 2000 census. It is highly likely that a smaller population base at the time of the *Plan of Chicago* would have meant less resistance to the proposal than as opposed to now.

This lesson not learned is clear now, when the Canadian National Railroad (CN) must spend \$400 million to acquire and improve a beltline to accomplish the century-old goal of routing freight traffic around Chicago, and must have their proposal approved by the U.S. Surface Transportation Board (STB) (Canadian National Railway, 2008). The CN acquisition and improvement plan also faces opposition since the regions effected, sparsely populated 100

years ago, are now within the sphere of urban sprawl and therefore the plan potentially impacts traffic and quality of life in ways that would not be issues if the changes were made when first proposed by the *Plan*.

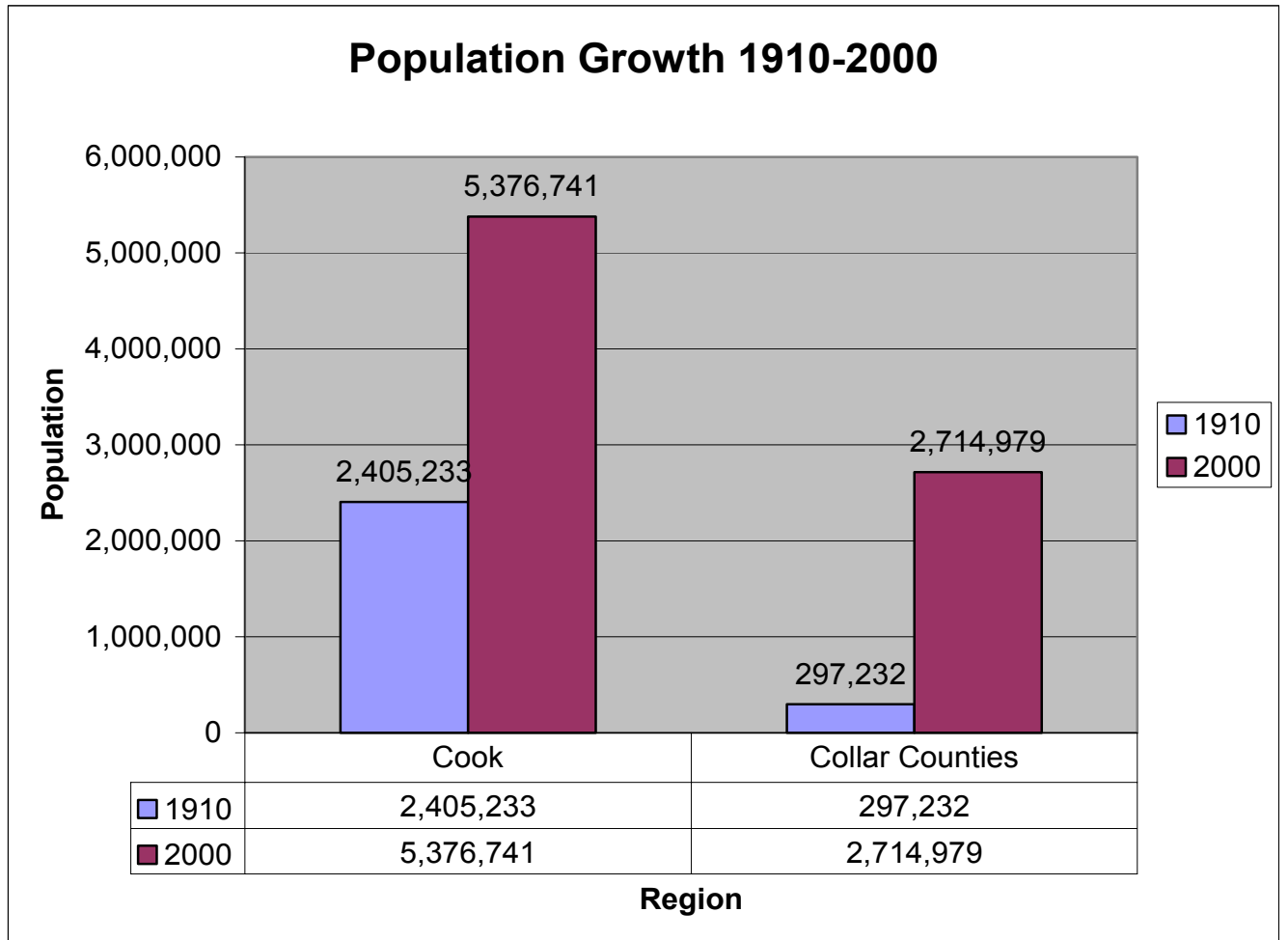


Figure 1. Population growth for Cook County and the surrounding counties from 1910 to 2000. (Edstrom 2002).

The most important reason that planning initiatives need to be supported and acted upon is that lack of follow-through has historically allowed problems to grow. The CN story is only one example of an idea first proposed long ago that would have been less disruptive and less expensive if acted upon when proposed. The *Plan of Chicago* was also prescient in advocating

clean up of factory areas for the improvement of inner-city quality of living (Burnham & Bennett, 1993); those areas are today's brownfields and urban wastelands that are our greatest urban environmental challenges (Zvenyach & Littmann, March 2006).

The need for transit improvement today might be less pressing if the *Plan of Chicago's* comprehensive transit initiatives had become reality (Burnham & Bennett, 1993). Our current reliance on using the 2016 Olympic bid to create results is a gamble that might backfire if another city succeeds in landing the Olympics. The city of Chicago is hoping that their attempt to become the host city for the 2016 summer Olympic Games will influence the state and national legislators to fund needed transportation improvements for the Chicago region.

Figure 2 shows data from the applicant city bid package submitted by Chicago 2016 (2008), the umbrella organization responsible for Chicago's involvement in the bid process. The dollar amounts reflect current proposed, partially funded, or partially completed initiatives that are needed regardless of the success of the Olympic bid. Over \$1.6 billion is to be spent on highway improvements, mainly for additional lanes added to existing expressways. The cost for transit improvements is \$828 million, including a new downtown depot for airport transit lines, capacity improvements on the northwest "Brown Line" within the city, purchase of modern rail cars, and construction of a new intermodal rail station for the Rock Island transit line on the south side of the city. The Create Initiative, "a phased multiproject construction program that will improve vehicular, pedestrian and freight rail interface, resulting in a safer and more efficient use of these transportation systems" requires \$230 million (Chicago 2016, 2008, p. 73). The concern is that a negative response to Chicago's bid might have a cascading negative effect on these needed initiatives. Since the Olympic bid is being put forward as the impetus for these

programs, will a Chicago failure in the Olympic pursuit lead to a lack of support for the infrastructure improvements?

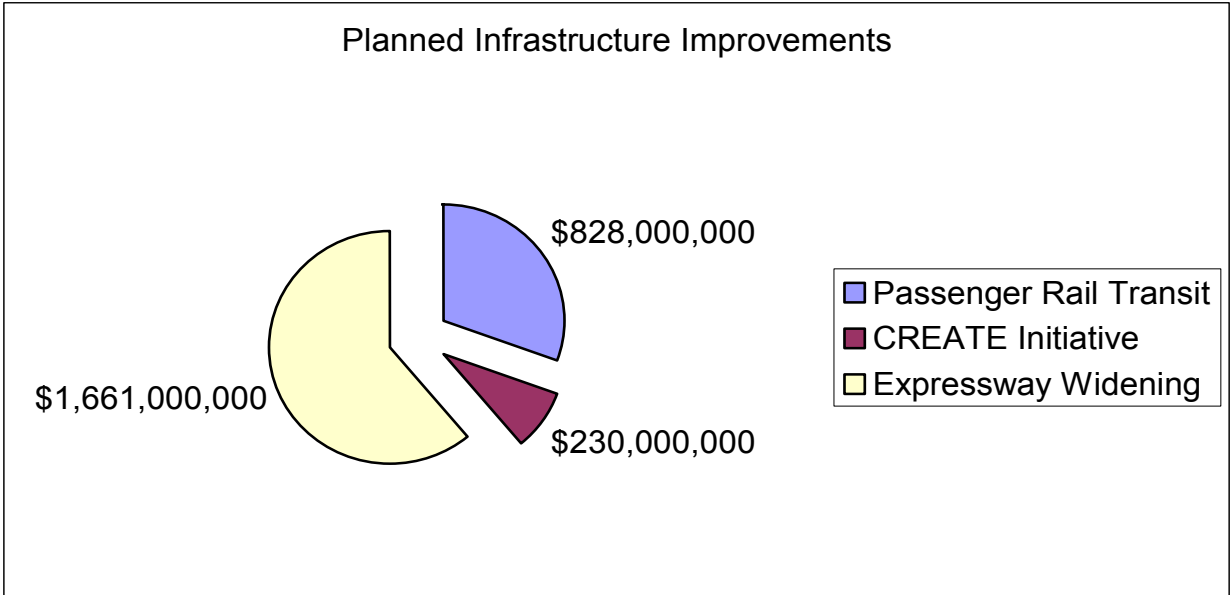


Figure 2. Cost of planned and needed infrastructure improvements that Chicago 2016 is using in their bid for the Olympics. (Chicago 2016, 2008).

The importance of following through on planning initiatives that are valid and have promise for positive future development is born out by the research commissioned by Chicago Metropolis 2020. The studies analyzed the costs and potential benefits of several scenarios versus a baseline position of allowing the region’s current mass transit systems to deteriorate and decline. The envisioned scenarios included: (1) providing sufficient funding to maintain current service; (2) providing sufficient annual funding to expand above current service; and (3) tying expansion of service to thoughtful future development so that residential centers would be built in areas that could efficiently utilize the transit. Figure 3 shows the annual cost of investment with the projected return on investment for each scenario (Chicago Metropolis 2020, 2007).

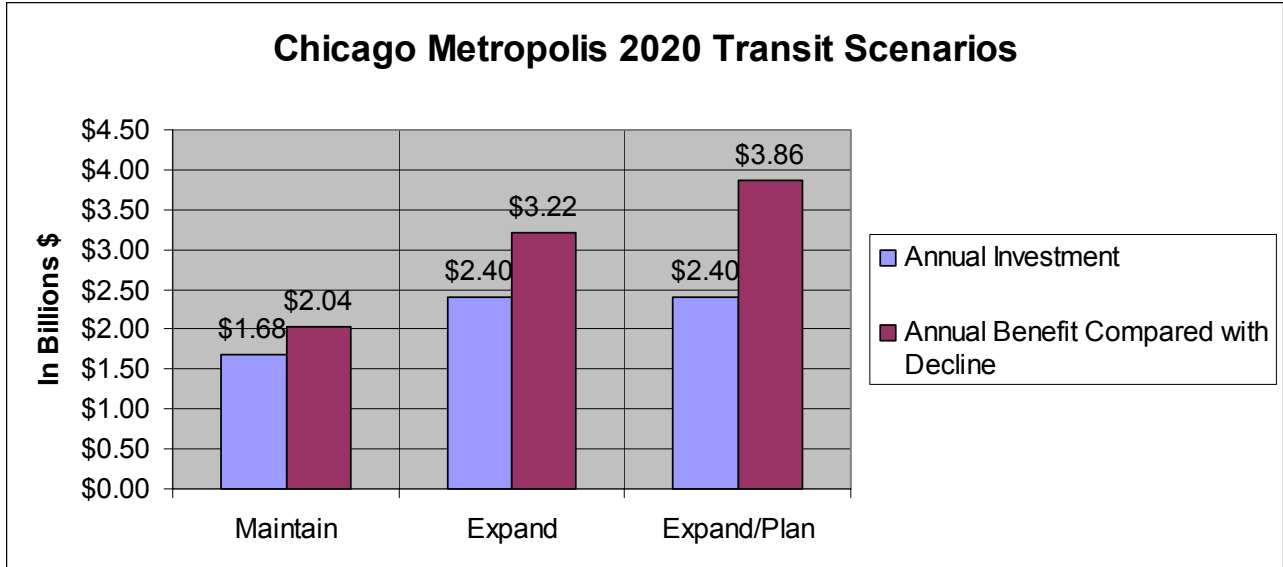


Figure 3. Return on investment for comparative transit scenarios. (Chicago Metropolis 2020, 2007).

Chicago Metropolis 2020 clearly shows that investment now leads to benefits later, and that proper planning of development tied to transit improvements increases the level of future benefit. As a region, Chicago must unite behind planning initiatives on their own merit in order to ensure their adoption and completion. Their benefits far outweigh the short-term gains of a successful Olympics bid, and they are too important to ignore if the Olympic bid is unsuccessful. All sectors of society stand to gain from planning improvements, and most lose if we fail. Eventually, problems must be solved, and the cost of doing so in the future is much greater, and the benefit much smaller, than if the problems are tackled now. We must not only make “no little plans,” we must act on the plans that we make.

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