Speaking at a Transit Future gathering in June, Congressman Mike Quigley spoke about luring federal matching grants for local transportation projects by providing a united front of local leaders.

The congressman called for regional policymakers “to have a vision and ... to know the needs of the region.” Though optimistic that “we’re finally getting people to realize this is a regional issue,” the congressmen noted that recognition has not led to real regional leadership.

“I will tell you what is lacking is a cohesive, coordinated system for collectivizing what the public will is,” Quigley said.

The congressman emphasized the need to be “practical” given the circumstances and challenges in today’s Congress. He nevertheless emphasized that Cook County’s infrastructure “can’t wait” and that we need to be “smart” in asking for funding for the projects that will have the most clear and substantive benefits for the region as a whole. The congressman was adamant about his conviction that Chicagoland needs transit expansion, emphasizing that, “what I’m asking you is to help me get it done.”

The audience drew diversely from the many constituencies with a stake in Cook County’s future, including nonprofit and business representatives, elected officials, civil servants, and union and community leaders.

Cook County has rightfully invested resources in a comprehensive transportation plan called Connecting Cook County that is slated for release in the coming months. But the County will be competing for federal money with cities, counties, and states that have planning documents as good, if not better. In order to be successful, Quigley argued, the county will have to gain a broad coalition of support among planning organizations and municipalities across the Chicago region.
Outdated Infrastructure

Chicagoland’s public transit infrastructure is dated – Quigley pointed out that much of it “dates to the Great Depression” – but the need for public investment is not isolated to the region. Nationally, the backlog of transportation needs is about $3 trillion. Far more projects are needed than Congress can afford to offset with matching grants.

“The dollars are scarce and if we in Cook County don’t get it right, we’re not going to get the dollars,” Quigley said. These dollars are scarce not only because need is growing, but also because investment is shrinking, Quigley noted. America’s transportation investment is lower than it’s ever been – it’s half the level it was 50 years ago. To hammer that point home, Quigley pointed to a report that ranked our formerly world-class transportation system, including our transit, at 19th in the world.

“We used to dream big,” Quigley said, “and the other countries [with] which we’re competing have got that: Europe is spending twice as much. China is spending four times as much.”

Quigley pointed out that Americans have started to see the high cost of deferring much needed investments in public transit and other transportation infrastructure. America’s crumbling infrastructure slows economic growth. The congressman showed that investments in infrastructure have the opposite effect, helping the economy both directly and indirectly. Every million dollars invested in transit has the immediate effect of spurring $1.8 million of additional spending and 3,000 new jobs. Transportation investments also fuel economic growth by attracting businesses and workers that need good roads, railways, ports, and public transit.

And while good roads are an important component, the public has come to see transit as particularly indispensable to the region’s viability. Quigley was adamant that people are “begging their leadership” to take on our public transit infrastructure. The public wants it, so it is high time for the Chicago region’s elected leaders to find a way to pay for it.

Transportation Safety

These shifting attitude in favor of transit were catalyzed by a fatal Amtrak crash in Philadelphia in May that injured 200 people and left eight dead. Quigley noted that such a tragedy could have been avoided with investment in a safety measure known as Positive Train Control.

The Philadelphia crash shone a light on the human cost of underfunded rail. Quigley believes it should be a wake-up call for the need to invest in Cook County transit and to implement potentially life-saving technologies like Positive Train Control. While Amtrak has started installing the technology on select parts of its network, including most of the corridor between Washington D.C. and New York, Metra would need at least a decade to build out Positive Train Control, and that is only if someone provides the funding. Metra, along with CTA and PACE, currently forgo investments that would make riders safer every day because the funding is not there.

Quigley was well aware of the risks of forgoing investment in Cook County’s transit technology, which he called “state of the art in the Hoover Administration.”

“I just wish the folks riding those trains who say ‘I don’t want to pay for this and this’ would see the switches their trains are riding over,” Quigley said. “It’s scary stuff.”
Transit Expansion

Safety is a top priority, but the congressman by no means implied that Cook County’s transportation needs end there, highlighting the need for transit expansion to meet the demands of a growing region. Even without federal dollars, recent trends of rising urban density and falling car use won’t be reversed.

“The market’s driving this anyway,” Quigley said, “because the consumers are figuring it out.”

The congressman shared his belief that cities that don’t adapt to this market shift by expanding transit will not attract young professionals, who tend to own fewer cars, use more transit and walk or bike more of their commutes.

As congressional and presidential priorities shift to transit funding, the time is ripe for Cook County to prioritize public transit expansion. If Cook County wants a slice of this incipient federal funding, it needs to be ready with coordinated plans and local funding in hand. In particular, according to Quigley, the many entities involved in Cook County’s transit system need to be coordinated. He called for plans in which “the mayor and the governor, and the county board president, and the aldermen, and the state reps, the state senators; everybody is on the same page.”

Federal Funding

At the federal level, elected officials are starting to recognize the urgent needs of our transit systems and the importance of funding them. Mr. Quigley sees positive signs from the Senate and the White House in asking for federal money.

Quigley talked about a private meeting with President Obama and was happy to report that Obama was both confident about and committed to transportation infrastructure. “The number one thing the president of the United States from Chicago said he thinks he can get done, and really wants to get done, is a big infrastructure transportation bill,” Quigley said.

In the federal legislative branch, things have been changing as well. Congressman Quigley was able to report firsthand on the types of discussions that characterize meetings of the House Transportation, Housing and Urban Development (THUD) committee. He is a member of THUD, which is in large part responsible for doling out transportation funding. Though he referred to transit funding as his “niche,” he added that he is not alone among THUD members in his belief that America needs to invest more in transit. Committee members from both sides of the aisle see the trends necessitating transit expansion – reduced vehicle miles traveled and increased population in dense, urban neighborhoods – and believe that “we’ve got to start spending money where people use it.”
Cook County’s Transit Future

Transportation, of course, is not cheap. But it is a necessary investment. Quigley addressed the scarce resources faced by all governments, including Cook County, by pithily urging leaders to “use these dollars well and to generate more dollars.”

Generating revenue is, to an extent, the easy part. But to use it well, and to secure federal dollars on top of that, requires planning and coordination. Quigley’s emphasis on coordination is a call for Cook County to take the lead in planning regional transit. No governmental body in the Chicago region is better situated to collect the funds, coordinate the planning, and oversee the construction of regionally minded transit expansion than Cook County. The majority of Chicagoland’s population and transit riders live in Cook County, and most of Chicagoland’s most pressing transit expansion needs are in the county, too. These new lines are our Transit Future, and they are ready to get Cook County moving again.

ABOUT THE TRANSIT FUTURE CAMPAIGN

Transit Future is a campaign to build a 21st century transit system in Cook County, making the region more livable, economically competitive, and environmentally sustainable. Efficient and affordable public transit helps link people to jobs, reduces congestion, and fosters sustainable economic growth. Transit Future’s mission is to build broad support in Cook County for increased, impactful, and immediate investment in an expanded regional public transportation system.

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